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An Era of Fractured Narrative

Building a Bridge to the 18th Century by Neil Postman

I mean by “narrative” a story. But not any kind of story. I refer to *big* stories – stories that are sufficiently profound and complex to offer explanations of the origins and future of a people; stories that construct ideals, prescribe rules of conduct, specify sources of authority, and, in doing all this, provide a sense of community and purpose...

. What is important about narratives is that human beings cannot live without them. We are burdened with a kind of consciousness that insists on our having a purpose. Purposefulness requires a moral context, and moral context is what I mean by narrative.

(Later in the book, Postman writes this:

We come, then, to the question: Exactly how can their narrative help us to manage things in the century ahead? There are several ways I should like to suggest. The first and most obvious is to **reaffirm the necessity of a transcendent narrative, for without one, we can have no sense of purpose.** Page 107)

The construction of narratives is, therefore, a major business of our species; certainly, no group of humans has ever been found that did not have a story that defined for them how they ought to behave and why. That is the reason why there is nothing more disconcerting, to put it mildly, than to have one’s story mocked, contradicted, refuted, held in contempt, or made to appear trivial. To do so is to rob a people of their reason for being.... (p101)

1. Like all of you, I am interested in why everything feels so broken today. Everything feels fraught with anxiety, and tension. When I said a couple of weeks ago that reading the newspaper has become a kind of act of courage, I was told that it resonated with others.

I find myself needing escapes from what used to be simply ordinary living. My own escapes are pretty harmless—I read the sports pages more seriously even as my team is terrible. I read more fiction than ever before. I want to get lost in stories. I yearn for the silence of silent prayer to quiet my soul. I yearn for the beauty of the music of prayer—connecting me to what feels ancient, wise, soulful, solid and enduring. That noble ideas, ideals, wisdom and values live on no matter what the buffeting events of my short life brings me a degree of comfort.

I find greater sympathy for those whose lives are less safe than mine, less secure, and their need for unhealthy escape --drink or drugs.

I also wish to understand the why—why are these times what they are?

(READ BEGINNING OF POSTMAN)

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1. Neil Postman offers me insight when he says that we live inside of narratives. We, on the other hand, live in an age of broken narratives—or at the least bitterly contested narratives—narratives that are scorned and condemned. I have said this

before. I intuitively feel this. It is very difficult for me to explain—extraordinarily difficult.

The narrative is the cultural ground that we emotionally and psychologically walk on—so to speak. Ours is cracked.

I believe that Abraham Lincoln captured the heart of our American narrative with the words “government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.” The entire speech feels biblical as Lincoln used words like “consecrate,” “hallow,” and “under God.” In other words, Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg offered the listener and us still today, a sense of transcendence. We get a hint that we are Americans because there is something more here.

More? What do I mean? Something more to being an American?

2. It is what Thomas Nagel refers to when he writes:

“the religious temperament (and here I am suggesting that there is a religious temperament inside of all of us—usually—too often dormant because we have made it so—I will therefore say our soulful tempermant) regards a merely human life as insufficient, as a partial blindness to or rejection of the terms of our existence. It asks for something more encompassing without knowing what it might be...”

As humans, we are unable to simply be. We are creatures that yearns for a transcendent framework in which to live—a narrative through which life has purpose and meaning—we want something that soars.

Lincoln knew this—

In writing these words, Lincoln is connecting “of the people”—our elected officials should be people like us.

“By the people”—we vote—we select—there is a sense of fair play and equality

“For the people”—not for themselves, our special interests but government is for all of us.

He is connecting these elements of democracy to something transcendent –something that elevates the human experience. Lincoln is suggesting that Democracy makes us part of a grand human experiment.

And

He makes it sound so natural and right even as we know that this narrative was incomplete and excluded so many in an era of slavery.

In an era of a broken narrative, it comes to sound naïve—because a broken narrative invites cynicism.

We live in an age of unabashed and rampant cynicism. It is the stock and trade of many public officials. Anyone who seeking to undermine the integrity of our system of government and our most cherished institutions is trading in cynicism. They are undermining Lincoln at Gettysburg and its sacred legacy.

There is to be sure, plenty of reason for doubt-- that but the answer to doubt —for me anyhow—is not to destroy —but to rebuild—and to rebuild trust and faith and hope that point towards the future, a better, more just and inclusive future.

Nostalgia is always a trap.

4.

And as Postman says— (NOW PART 2 OF POSTMAN)

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3. I think what we are living thru is the angst, chaos, and travail of a broken narrative.

When a people is robbed of an overarching narrative, the bottom falls out and we are left with fragments—competing stories of who we are.

4. Finally--What we are experiencing in this country is so evidently true in Israel as well.

As Jews, we are living with two broken narratives—the Zionist narrative has also been torn asunder.

5. This, of course, invites questions as to why. What causes narratives to no longer function? Here, the answers are complicated but I think that historical events come to expose and bring into focus real and searing societal problems that take real effort and openness to solve.

A great transcendent narrative is aspirational not a picture of reality.

The Civil War—slavery, emancipation, Jim Crow, WWI and WWII, the Civil Rights Movement and the Reagan Revolution and what it wrought have all combined to bring us where we are today—an American narrative of Lincoln and FDR for the 20th century, an aspirational

narrative for a build back better America is being threatened to be torn asunder.

In Israel, the Six Day War, occupation, occupation, the rise of a political religious Judaism are among the elements to undermine the Zionist narrative.

It takes patience and maturity to expand and reach for the aspirations of a prevailing narratives—it is much easier to destroy.

This is where we are now.

I want to end with a word of hope.

I remain inspired by our biblical ancestors. I would like to close with a famous passage from the Book of Kings that I was reminded of this morning as I responded to an email from someone who lives out of town and was asking me about events in their own synagogue.

וַיֵּאמֶר צֵא וְעַמְדַת בְּהָרָא ... עֵבֶר וְרוּחַ גְּדוּלָּה וְחֵזֶק מִפְּרִקֵי הָרִים וּמִשְׁבְּרֵי סְלָעִים ... לֹא בְרוּחַ יְהוָה וְאֶחָד הָרוּחַ רָעַשׁ לֹא בְרַעַשׁ יְהוָה:

“Come out,” God called, “and stand on the mountain ... There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks ... but

GOD was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but GOD was not in the earthquake.

אַחַר הַרְעַשׁ אֵשׁ לֹא בָאֵשׁ יְהוָה וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמַמָּה דַּקָּה:

After the earthquake—fire; but GOD was not in the fire. And after the fire—a still small voice. (I Kings 19)

Elijah stood firm in the powerful wind, earthquake, and fire committed to the still small voice within. That is the Bible's metaphoric way of saying that Elijah stood by his faith as he faced the storms and travails of his own time. We might say that he stood by his principles like a rock. That is the essential "stuff" of Jewish life.

Jewish life has thrived in this country like at no other time or place in all Jewish history. That is because of America's (yes imperfect) commitment to the Enlightenment principles of "liberty and justice for all," "government of the people, by the people and for the people," and "all men are created equal." The philosophical ideas that generated these formulations go back to Genesis and the accompanying rabbinic commentaries.

I believe that both here and in Israel, we each have to stand for them, as did Elijah before us, like a rock.

Shabbat Shalom