

I was going to talk about community today. I suppose I still am, but from a completely different perspective, because a single event changed things for me.

I was in Texas on Friday the 18th when the news broke about a shooting at Santa Fe High School. My first thought was for my home town and my friends with children in high school.

But it turned out there is a Santa Fe, Texas, and that the killer had stalked the halls of another school, and for a moment I felt a strange sense of relief, that odd sensation we get after we have a close call, a near miss, feel the slight breeze on the back of the neck as death passes us by.

And part of me wondered if I would have paid that much attention if the names had not been the same. Somehow, that broke through and made it personal. These shootings have become so commonplace, so regular, that we are becoming numb to them, just another shooting at another school, the same dreadful predictable pattern of reporting and responses.

And nothing seems to change. If anything, the problem is getting worse. We now average over one school shooting per week in America.

All high schools in America have become one high school, dreading the day when another young man brings guns to school and starts murdering his teachers and classmates. The last life they usually take is their own, although sometimes they allow themselves to be captured.

You'd think being able to question these few living perpetrators would provide some insight, but it doesn't really. Young, male, disconnected, pissed off – the story is always the same, although the details are different.

And the answers have become equally predictable. I'm not going to rehash those this morning.

An article published in the New Yorker a week later had this to say about Santa Fe, Texas.

“The town has retained a rural, deeply conservative character, bridging Texan culture with the Old South; this week, I saw several Confederate flags waving on front lawns. In the 2016 election, nearly eighty per cent of voters in the Santa Fe precinct supported Donald Trump, and several people told me

that, on the local list of priorities, guns are not far behind God. Students stand by what they've heard from older generations—parents, pastors, bosses, elected officials—all their lives. They seem reluctant to join the March for Our Lives movement, which was formed by students in Parkland, Florida, in February, after a mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School killed seventeen people, most of them teen-agers. ...And yet many of them do want to understand why someone they knew, and saw every day, would be driven to do something so awful. They may not say guns are the problem, but they are left with the haunting sense that something is wrong. "All I want is for safety to be the feeling we have when we hear the name America," Dylan (a Santa Fe High student) said. "Not what we hear now." "

Would it be unkind for me to point out the karmic irony of the statement *"All I want is for safety to be the feeling we have when we hear the name America..."*, when for so many that name invokes just the opposite, both here and abroad?

I think it would be. Dylan only knows what he's been taught. He trusted his parents and teachers and pastors and leaders, because those are the people he's supposed to trust.

His country, his town, his school is supposed to be a safe place, and it isn't. Something is wrong, and that knowledge simmers down deep, not yet fully articulated.

And it's not that his teachers and parents and leaders have deliberately misled him. Everything looks fine in the surface, the same as it ever was.

As a country, we disagree on the causes of gun violence, and on the solutions.

It is what is called a wicked problem - a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for many reasons: our incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden of a solution, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems.

And it's not the only wicked problem we face. Racism, inequality, climate change.. the list is pretty damn long.

Wicked problems can't be "fixed" or solved, only mitigated. This mitigation is not an easy, quick, or solitary exercise. Due to the systemic nature of these large problems, knowledge of science, economics, statistics, technology, medicine, politics, and more are necessary for effective change. They demand interdisciplinary and intercultural cooperation and collaboration, and most importantly, perseverance.

Without cooperation and collaboration, such problems can't even be mitigated, and such large scale cooperation is now impossible.

**

Why? Let's think for a moment about time, and history, and older ways of looking at things.

The day and the year and the seasons pass through cycles. Human beings also pass through similar seasons, transitions, and passages as they fulfill their destiny. My teachers taught me that we enter the world through the Spirit gate in the East (the Spring), grow into childhood in the South (which corresponds to Summer), through adolescence in the West (the Autumn), we are initiated into adulthood in the North (Winter), and then pass into elderhood before returning again to Spirit. In one variation or another, generations upon generations have followed each other along this ancient cycle.

Empires also follow a predictable pattern as they fulfill their destiny, collapsing after about 10 generations, or roughly 250 years. The final stages of an empire are marked by very distinct signs and symptoms, as described by Sir John Glubb in his book, *The Fate of Empires*. This is true in all 16 empires that Sir John studied, from Asia to the Middle East to the Americas.

Service ethics disappear and selfishness takes over. Education shifts from learning to obtaining qualifications for high paying jobs. The young and ambitious seek wealth, not honor or service. Civil conflict increases, even as the empire is under threat from without. Instead of banding together to preserve the nation, internal political factions seek to destroy one another.

In the end stage, moral decay sets in. Petty and negative behaviors dominate, including narcissism, consumerism, materialism, and fanaticism. A celebrity culture worships athletes, actors, and

musicians. The masses are distracted by entertainment and sporting events. The leaders believe they are impervious and will govern forever.

Surprisingly, it is at the very end of an empire that the welfare state and the expansion of universal rights emerges. Universal citizenship, assistance for the poor, education grants, and free medical care were all offered by the Roman Empire, and the Arab Empire of Baghdad, to name a couple. But when the money runs out, these things disappear.

The fact of the matter is that we are living in a time where this American empire – and perhaps this global civilization - is falling apart. This isn't sour grapes, or generational dismay. This is what history teaches us. This is not about being doomed to repeat history, it is understanding that this is what human civilizations and empires do. They collapse. Every time. We know of some 30 civilizations that have done so. The planet is littered with their ruins.

And don't make the mistake of thinking "it's different this time" or, "it can't happen here". Don't make the mistake of thinking that technology will save us. If anything, our technology is accelerating the collapse.

Everything rises, every falls away, say the Zen teachers. And their advice is always the same. Don't get attached. Go with the flow, whether rising or falling.

Which is harder than it seems.

**

I wish I could tell Dylan that we could prevent this collapse, this unraveling, this devastation, but there is no way to avoid it. We can only live through it, preserving what we value.

**

I keep thinking about a number of stories, some of them quite old. They all have to do with shadows, and Devil's bargains. As anyone from earlier times could tell you, the problem with making deals with the Devil is that not only does the Devil usually get the better of you, but you lose your soul as well.

One story in particular is “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas”, by Ursula K. Le Guin.

Omelas is a shining city of unbelievable happiness and delight. Omelas is a serene and lovely community, whose citizens are intelligent, sophisticated, and cultured. Omelas has no kings, soldiers, priests, or slaves. There is no poverty or strife.

But the city's constant state of serenity and splendor requires that a single unfortunate child be kept in perpetual filth, darkness, and misery.

Once citizens are old enough to know the truth, most, though initially shocked and disgusted, ultimately acquiesce with that one injustice which secures the happiness of the rest of the city. In the words of the story:

They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms.

The story never asks - or answers - the question of how this Devil’s bargain was made, or who made it. Does it matter? It has gone on so long, become so entrenched, that the citizens of Omelas cannot imagine a different world.

But a few citizens, young and old, silently walk away from the city, and no one knows where they go.

The story ends with these words: *“The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.”*

**

In his book, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Joseph Tainter tells us that a society has collapsed when it displays a rapid, significant loss of an established level of sociopolitical complexity, a fundamental

failure of its social and political spheres. We need only look to Washington DC to see the evidence of this.

A society has collapsed when reaches a point where it can no longer maintain the complexity required to keep itself going. Things fall apart pretty quickly then, usually within decades. Just look at our roads and bridges and schools and institutions.

These things can't be fixed. The wheel cannot be turned back.

As our social order fails, people fall back on their own resources. Things contract. We retreat into clans and tribes and ethnicities. We can see this happening in real time. Cynicism sets in, followed by despair.

Sir John observed that: "While despair might permeate the greater part of the nation, others achieved a new realization of the fact that only readiness for self-sacrifice could enable a community to survive. Some of the greatest saints in history lived in times of national decadence, raising the banner of duty and service against the flood of depravity and despair"

These are the ones who walk away. The ones who finally say that there are some prices that are too high to pay. Who say that community comes before the individual, that discipline and simplicity and self-sacrifice are our guides. Who say that there are some things worth preserving no matter the cost. Who imagine a different future.

**

It's time to start walking away. It's time to start walking towards something else, even if we don't know what that is yet.

We couldn't save this empire even if we wanted to. Its time has passed, even if the hollow shell staggers on for another few decades. Oh, things will look normal for a while, but that will be an illusion.

But we can work to save our local communities and organizations, our schools, our towns, our businesses. In the words of Margaret Wheatley, we can create islands of sanity amid the dislocation and chaos that accompanies the fall of an empire.

What is an island of sanity? Wheatley describes these as places where humans support each other to be generous, creative, and kind. Where broken relationships are rebuilt. Where human beings trust each other to show up in community, despite their differences.

And yes, that's hard to do. Trust has been broken in so many ways, it's hard to know where to begin. But we know where we have to begin. Right here, right now, with ourselves and those closest to us. Trust first. Foster small scale cooperation and collaboration. Be sane and have faith.

**

Now, I am not suggesting that we completely abandon action in the larger social and political arenas. But we can't ignore or discount the historical context within which that action is taking place. Knowing what is happening and why helps us make sense of who we are and what we do.

Our job is not to fix a collapsing empire. Our job is to be kind and generous and creative. To encourage people not to despair, and to also be kind and generous and creative. To remind them that we've been here before as humans. Our ancestors lived through these collapses, and our children and their children will live through this one. It will be hard, but human beings have lived through much, much worse. We can do it too.

There's another world waiting out there. Walk away from this one. That's what I would tell Dylan.

References

The Collapse of Complex Societies, Joseph A Tainter, Cambridge University Press 1988

The Fate of Empires, John Bagot Glubb, William Blackwood and Sons, Ltd. 1978

Who Do We Choose To Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity, Margaret Wheatley, Berrett-Koehler 2017