

It has occurred to me lately that America seems to be hell bent on restoring the past. Not the imaginary past of “Make America Great Again”, but an earlier and harsher past.

Back to the Future. A future that looks suspiciously like pre-modern Europe.

Plagues were regular occurrences. We should remember that Rome declined as much from viruses and disease as from economic and political decay. The Black Death of the 1340s and 50s killed more than 40% of Europe’s population. The rich fled the cities. Religious orders claimed the arrival of the end of days. Famines swept the land. There were centuries of intermittent wars. Death was ever present.

Back to the Future.

A classist future, ruled by elites. Not the hereditary elites of old, but political and economic elites, who nonetheless share many of the same attitudes and promote many of the same policies as the feudal Lords of yore.

The new aristocracy – the political and economic elites, and the new tech oligarchs – rule from their gated communities or remote enclaves, guarded by both public and private security. The socialize at elite resorts and private gatherings, uninterested in the realities of regular folk.

They are served by a growing class of serfs and beggars. The serfs drive their cars, serve their food, and clean their houses, tied to their masters by near poverty and algorithms on cell phone apps. The middle class they could once aspire to is shrinking. Beggars on street corners and in tent cities barely scrape by on the leavings of the larger society.

Back to the Future.

In that past, economic and social inequality was always the rule. The elites saw themselves as the necessary upholders of social order, without which society would descend into chaos. The poor were literally seen as another race, dangerous and largely irredeemable. Then, as now, crime was defined and punished primarily as an activity that threatened the status, property and interests of the elites. Harsh punishment was the response to almost any crime. You could

be hanged for stealing a loaf of bread, or perhaps be transported to Australia, never to see home or family again.

The reality was that crime and disorder among the lowest classes were a response to the oppressions imposed upon them. There were riots and revolts that were violently suppressed. Things finally changed because people got organized. The trade unions arose in England in the 1800s. The Ten Hours Act was passed in 1847. The trade unions became legal in 1871.

A similar movement was happening in America. As in England, for many years it was illegal to organize for better wages and working conditions. To do so was to engage in criminal conspiracy. The ability to organize became legal in America in 1842, and after that, labor began the long fight for better wages and the rights of working people.

And a fight it was. The current unrest in our streets is mild compared to that struggle.

In the fight for the eight hour day, thousands and thousands marched across America month after month and year after year. They shut everything down. Were they violent? Yes. Our ancestors were badasses. They had to be. Does anyone think that they just asked nicely to be given living wages and be treated like human beings? They fought hard for the rights that so many of us now take for granted. They fought hard against authorities who beat or shot workers in these actions. Cities ground to a halt with rage in the face of the injustices that occurred when companies had the police departments and the courts firmly in their pocket or could hire mercenary armies to maim or kill workers. Worker violence raged across this nation for decades until change came. They risked life and limb and what little they had to make a better world.

And yet, here we are again. People marching in the streets for the right to be treated as human beings, the bullets flying once more.

Our ancestors include those on both sides of this struggle, they have been oppressors and oppressed. From before the time when Moses said, "Let my people go" this struggle has existed.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reminds us in *The Gulag Archipelago*

"In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there rotting on prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small corner of evil.

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

What is it within us that keeps this wheel turning, this wheel of exploitation and suffering and resistance? What is it within us that allows this ancient pattern to emerge over and over again?

And ancient it is. As near as we can tell, cities and hierarchies and class have existed from the beginning of this thing we call civilization. The planet is littered with the ruins of empires and the unmarked graves of those who actually built the palaces and pyramids.

William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Rupert Sheldrake puts it another way, inviting us "...to think of the past as pressed up, as it were, against the present, and as potentially present everywhere."

The past presents itself to us as memories. And memories reside everywhere. In our DNA, our evolutionary history, in our cultures and institutions, in our minds, and in our myths and archetypes and rituals.

Memories are not ethereal ghosts of past events, but in a very real sense, they reside in across a multiplicity of realms - the physical, the mental, the psychological, the spiritual. I'd even go so far as to say that they are anchored in the physical world. What is DNA, if not the encoded memory of how to make a tree, a hawk, a human being? Cannot a touch, or a scent, bring memories to life? And of course, not all those memories are pleasant ones.

Bad childhoods, prejudice and racism, the misuse and abuse of power, ill words and deeds lie tangled alongside the kind words and the generousities and the golden sunlit days of our first loves. How easy it is to confuse them.

The past presses up against us. Anything in the past can reemerge at any time. Plague, war, oppression, famine, death, love, joy, birth, healing; are all an inch or minute or an hour away. Some arise unbidden. Some are remembered – called to mind – either consciously or unconsciously. We are more or less at their mercy.

This is the human condition, and the question is, how do we live with it?

Those who came before us had a number of answers to that question, and I must confess to a certain partiality to a set of what I see as related philosophies – Buddhism and Stoicism.

Stoicism is a school of Hellenistic philosophy which was founded by Zeno of Citium, in Athens, in the early 3rd century BC. Stoicism is a philosophy of personal ethics informed by its system of logic and its views on the natural world. According to its teachings, as social beings, the path to eudaimonia (happiness, or blessedness) for humans is found in accepting the moment as it presents itself, by not allowing oneself to be controlled by the desire for pleasure or fear of pain,

*by using one's mind to understand the world and to do one's part in nature's plan, and by working together and treating others fairly and justly.**

The basics of stoicism adhere to the four principal virtues of self-control, justice, wisdom, and courage, which form the cradle of a thriving society. Conversely, distress and suffering are caused by our unique interpretation and perception of situations, which creates our reality.

This last restates the central insight of the Buddha, that clinging to and craving impermanent states and things will not ultimately bring us peace or happiness. We cling to life, or comfort, or convenience. We cling to things and status, or one belief or ideology or another, and they are all impermanent.

We cannot change what happens to us, but we can choose how to respond. Like those who came before, we acknowledge that death comes rightfully for us all, and that all things are impermanent – empires, people, loves, stars, and flowers alike. Everything rises, and everything falls away.

Epictetus' Stoic teacher Musonius Rufus told him: "It is not possible to live well today unless you treat it as your last." When a Stoic wakes they tell themselves "You may never sleep again" and when going to sleep they say "You may not wake again". They thereby train themselves to be grateful for each day ahead, and contented when it has run its course.

From the Stoics to the Buddha to Carlos Castaneda to Eckhart Tolle comes the same message: Live in the now. This is what we have. This is how we live through plague and war and famine and disorder, one day at a time.

Love now, for we may not wake tomorrow. Be kind and generous now, for we may not wake tomorrow. Fight for justice now, today, for we may not wake tomorrow.

Every day we must ask which side of the hearts dividing line our words and deeds fall upon.

Ancestral Ways
Rev. Munro Sickafoose

Unitarian Congregation of Taos
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And the past with all its memories is right there to guide us. If you're ever in doubt, just ask:
What would bad-ass great-great-grandmother do?