

The Myth We're In : Part Two
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In Part One of this essay, I suggested that our current president brings to mind a buddhist asura, a relentlessly angry anti-god. Asuras cast a powerful spell of paralysis and division, but we can break the spell and become what the asura president refuses to be : protectors. Once we've found a myth that's helpful in describing a disastrous situation and suggesting a response, we can, blessedly, redirect our attention towards the longer-form work of asking how we got here, and how we might heal.

It was the day that began with the asura president calling African nations shitholes and ended with a presidential fixer paying hush money to a porn actress that I began to think about our country as experiencing an almost alchemical humiliation. It's so over the top that it evokes a kind of awe, a sense that we're in the presence of something transpersonal. And yet our humiliation didn't fall on us like a random meteor; it has causes and conditions. It's part of our history, our karma, our *wyrd to dree*, as my Scottish ancestors would say : our fate to endure, our knot to untie, our grievous wound to bind.

A time of humbling tests us mightily, but in the old ways it's part of any initiation, any threshold-crossing from one mode of being into another. It's the moment you put down, or have taken from you, your old habits and customs. It's a bare field surrounded by leafless trees, where the only place to gaze is inward. Humiliation empties us out, so that we can be filled with something larger. In other words, it's an essential step on the path to maturity. Humiliation presses a choice on us : Do we accept its devastating gift, so that our transformation can continue?

But who is this 'we'? America looks very different depending on where you're standing. 'We' weren't fine and then the asura presidency broke us; we were, in fact, very not fine in a whole bunch of ways. Perhaps our inability to mend the ways we're broken left an opening for the asura president. When I say 'we' or 'America,' I mean it in the way Langston Hughes did when he said, "O, let America be America again— / the land that never has been yet— / and yet must be ..." That America is a series of collisions between aspiration and actuality, formed by centuries of yearning, betrayal,

epic successes, and epic failures — a communal dreaming by a circle of unruly dreamers. Sometimes America’s initiation into maturity seems an unbearably slow and costly ceremony, but I find, now that it’s under such savage assault, a deep desire to protect the ceremony, and its chance of completing itself.

Humiliation has the same root as humus; it’s about being brought down to earth, having your face rubbed in it. It’s leaves sticking to you, dirt in your mouth, noticing beetles and your own breathing. Is that always a bad thing? What is the wisdom of this place, of loam and small insects and the absence of our own self-importance? Humble means undefended, and undefended can mean open to new thoughts, open to the hidden places in our own hearts, and to the hidden places in the hearts of others.

In the midst of the chaos and the shouting, the virtues of humility are quiet : simplicity, receptivity, self-examination, forbearance; the capacities for regret and remorse; the desire to press our ears to the ground to discern the deeper patterns under all the noise. These virtues are particularly important now because the asura presidency too has its causes and conditions, and they are not outside us. How have we been careless about America — about the land, about people, about our obligations to the rest of the world? From our beginnings and generation after generation, different groups of people have testified to the humiliations visited upon them, and often America listens only after a long time of not listening. Is it possible that because we have been slow to take care, America as a whole is now being humiliated in a way that can no longer be sidestepped or explained away? Is it possible that, exactly because we can’t unsee what we’ve now seen, we will move closer towards our maturity?

America is a crazy experiment : larger in land mass, more complex, and more diverse than any other democracy on the planet. There are so many reasons for the experiment to fail. But what if we pull this off? If we have the courage to see the devastating gift in this humiliation, we’ll sign for this package and open it up. As Rev. Bernice King, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s daughter, said, perhaps this is a blessing in disguise, the opportunity for America to correct itself.



But oh, the place we start from ... Medieval Europeans spoke of the Wild Ride : On late autumn nights when the wind blows strong, unquiet ghosts and spirits ride out of the forest into town, wreaking havoc and scooping up anything left unattended. Not a good night to be stumbling home late from the pub. From a miasma of grievance and his magic chaos powers, the asura president has conjured a new Wild Ride. The riders are mounted on horses we've seen before, but this time they've got some fancy new internet gadgetry, and they've been joined by mercenaries from overseas.

But hang on a second, the townspeople have a few questions : No matter how urgent the complaint, is the Wild Ride a helpful response? Is there any problem to which authoritarianism, white nationalism, unbridled greed, casual cruelty, cowardice, or the mindless destruction of civic life and the natural world the solution? Won't any movement that generates such things, even as byproducts on the way to some other goal, only cure the illness by killing the patient?

The answers to these questions seem self-evident to most of us. So how do we counter the Wild Ride and protect America's initiation? If our tradition offered a suggestion, it would be about the attitude with which we approach that work : We, town and forest, are one ecosystem. We aren't two mutually exclusive sides locked in mortal combat; we're one country experiencing powerful forces of fragmentation within itself. And so we'd refrain as much as we could from making divisions worse, focusing on countering the forces of fragmentation rather than attacking groups of people. We'd look for ways, large and small, to begin to rebind us to each other.

Someone once said that the third law of community life is that the person you have the most difficulty with will always come sit next to you at the meeting. It made me wonder, for whom am I that difficult person? Who rolls their eyes at my approach? How, in this Wild West standoff between townspeople and riders from the forest, have we become each others' shadows?



And so we come to the question of grievance. At times in our history, the expression of grievance has been prophetic, in the ancient sense of showing us a terrible truth and demanding that we become what we must be. Prophetic grievance fuels civil rights movements, and we've responded by imperfectly but steadily

enlarging our sense of who America is, group by marginalized group. Some people, largely those who used to be in the majority, have reacted to that expansion with a different kind of grievance, one that insists it's the only legitimate one, with the right to define who America is.

There's an old buddhist idea that the light bodhisattvas give off is the reflected radiance of all the prayers made to them. The asura presidency is like a bodhisattva evil twin, radiating back the grievances projected onto it. To be sure, some of the complaints, like our failure to address income inequality, are critical. The difficulty comes when people feel that their grievances are the only ones that matter — unlike those of kneeling football players or assaulted women or families torn apart by deportation. Sometimes even *caused* in part by kneeling football players and assaulted women and families torn apart by deportation.

When that kind grievance is exploited by a demagogue, you get an election in which millions of people feel justified in voting what they think of as their self-interest, even though they know that their vote will come at dire cost to someone else — lots of someone elses, actually. That was a sorrowful day in our history. And does anyone really believe that those voters will be better off in the end? Asuras have a kind of reverse Midas touch : Everything around them turns to iron and regret. I'm afraid the people who believed the asura president would champion them will experience their own humiliation before too long. After all that has happened, will it still be possible for us to meet then, on the bare, humble ground, and find a way forward together?

I don't always know how to hold this. Sometimes it helps to think of grievance in its old relationship to grief, as a cry of sorrow and loss. Grief that finds no consolation sometimes becomes grievance that's wielded as a weapon. People speak words at the memorial service they can never take back, families fight over the will. Ta-Nehisi Coates suggests that some white people are experiencing some of what black people have always endured in this country, and they don't like it. Imagine if their response had been, instead, *Oh, we get it*. Not knowing how to hold this, not completely trusting the stories I try out as explanation, I keep asking, *What pain is so great that it lashes out like that?* Can I listen, even here, for strands of prophetic possibility?

Somewhere underneath the slogans on hats and pundit shouting matches is a mournful truth : There are a lot of ways to suffer in this life. We do better or worse, day to day, handling that. Suffering shouldn't pit us against each other; it's the existential

condition we share. The only question, really, is what we're going to do about it. It's a noble question, that one, a question full of grace.



As I write this, the asura presidency looks like it's beginning to implode, and I'm surprised by a new concern tugging at my sleeve : If it does, will we heave a sigh of relief and turn away from our initiation? Will we make the mistake of believing that our humiliation was only about the presidency and not about us, too? I don't think so; the forces for prophecy and protection that have arisen feel stronger than that. Whatever comes next, I hope we stay faithful to this threshold moment, which we would call endarkenment. In this part of the ceremony, endarkenment means accepting the devastating gift of humiliation, opening to the grief of others, acknowledging our shadow. It awakens the desire to make amends where amends are needed. We can't force endarkenment on others, but we can take it on ourselves. We have done it sometimes, we Americans, and we can do it again. But deeper this time, more thorough-going, wholehearted. It's past time. Let us, for all our sakes, get this done.



Next : Figures as lacking in nuance as the asura president feel like cartoons, but they can also be archetypes. What might such a figure represent in our own psyches, and why does it disturb us so much?