

The Journey Back From Hades: Reclaiming America Through Positive Disintegration

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And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Patient Trust*
These are the times of disintegration.

Its first symptoms became vaguely sensed and then reported by the therapists, massage and others, concerned about the rising anxiety levels of their clients, as well as their own, in the spring of last year. And we know that there is a problem when the East Coast massage therapists report it. It ain't real till the \$250-per-hour-masseur's comfortably afflicted client bemoans. Canaries in coal mines and all that.

The more tangible yet ignored disintegration, of the unmassageable kind, has been progressing in America for decades, driven by the corporate greed that has shrunk the middle class and enslaved the working (and not) poor, fed the war machine and violence within our borders, led to the declining health of the populace, and an erosion of social bonds. It has been growing a split, on every level of existence, between the haves and have-nots, the comfortable and the afflicted, between men and women, between people of different religions and races, between human beings and other living species. We are seeing now that there never has been one America indivisible under God, but several disparate ones existing in opposition and a perpetual, deepening conflict fueled by rapacious capitalism.

The disintegration we are experiencing now was not caused by Trump/ism, but revealed through it. At its core, as it is always the case, lies a clash of values: specifically, the clash of primitive, dehumanizing pursuits of power, money, and self-aggrandizement with higher universal human values, the importance of which—and their dearth in our lives—has been dramatically unveiled in this conflict. This clash has pierced our willful blindness, unearthing the rifts in our society which we pretended, for too long, did not exist.

The breakthrough is not done yet, however—the revelation is rarely if ever complete. Neither the powerful and privileged, nor those who seek a sense of power and validation through identification with the strongman understand it. Yes, judging by the proliferation of the poverty porn—the journos' heartfelt dispatches from the forgotten America where despair and decay rule—the awareness of this one rift, among many, may be growing; however, history teaches us that narcissism is not broken by seeing but only through living, if that. As long as poverty is something the haves use as topics for their award-winning exposes, books and sermons from the Mount of TED (at \$7,500 a pop), rather than see as an affront to their humanity demanding direct personal engagement through decisive social action, they will not see well, if at all.

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We don't like to talk seriously about our values—and certainly not how they relate to mental health of individuals and nations—because such conversations, if honest, would necessitate change. And nobody likes change. We trot out values for important speeches and other special occasions, bragging about them and using them as weapons with which to clobber our opponents. In general, though, we relegate them to the domains of religion and the feel-good, for those comfortable enough in life, monetized spirituality. There they can be safely ignored, or

even dangled over the heads of the suffering masses as something to maybe aspire to, some day. But as long as the masseurs' clients remained mostly satisfied, authentic values, or rather their lack, had no emotional impact on the consciousness of the nation.

Until now.

Now, thanks to the short-fingered vulgarian whose lack of manners has made even the well-mannered panic, the darkness is making itself rapidly visible, and it cannot be ignored so easily. This is not for the lack of trying; if there is one thing that America has perfected, it is the art of denial. This is why the country as we believed we have known it is now disintegrating, and with it, our complacent, erroneous beliefs about it and ourselves.

This process is inevitable; and although it is and will be painful, it is also potentially positive, for many individuals and maybe even the entire nation. That's because even though disintegration, personal and not, is something that is typically feared—understandably so, as it means destruction of what's known and thus safe—there is also another way to look at it.

Dabrowski's Counter-Cultural Theory

The alternative view of disintegration of the personal kind was articulated over half a century ago by a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, Kazimierz Dabrowski, who observed that his patients struggling with neurotic and especially psychoneurotic symptoms (the difference is the predominance of the mental over somatic problems in the latter) were creative, thoughtful, and yearning to change themselves and the world.

He also noted that all creative people who have left the positive mark on the world—especially artists, philosophers, moral exemplars and saints—frequently struggled with similar psychological difficulties which, painful as they were, often enriched their characters, stimulated their creativity, and propelled their development. Thus, rather than pathologize such symptoms or otherwise make his patients conform to the status quo, Dabrowski stressed their positive value as both harbingers and mechanisms of personality development.

His clinical experience led him to develop the theory of positive disintegration (TPD), which posits that, far from being destructive and undesirable, many forms of psychological suffering—*anxiety, depression, doubts, inner conflicts, even psychosis*—are positive and necessary for emotional and personality development. More often than not, they are expressive of the emerging understanding of the multilevel nature of reality, inner and external, and, related, an objectively existing hierarchy of human values. This understanding becomes a basis of personality growth through positive disintegration.

Dabrowski's theory is well worth knowing, but even though its creator spent part of his life in the US and he and his work were warmly received for a time by the greats of American psychology, it never gained popularity here, for some reasons that are more obvious than others. Two of them seem to loom large.

First, people in general, and Americans in particular, do not like being reminded that pain and suffering are an inextricable part of the human condition. We understandably want to avoid both; even when we can no longer do so, we still try—through distractions, medication, or employment of various forms of magical thinking, from self-help to positive psychology. And while there is nothing terribly wrong with such attempts, they offer only temporary solutions—and sometimes no solutions at all. Sometimes they obscure the source of our suffering and the means of its amelioration, which is authentic growth and change.

Second, the theory is counter-cultural in that its ideas go against the prevailing (or *unilevel*, as Dabrowski would call them) beliefs and social mores, with a potential to revolutionize our outlook on mental health and disorder, and our life in general.

Unlike other theories of human development, TPD presents—and assists—the human being in the dynamic, arduous and often tragic process of becoming. It postulates that mental health is the capacity for personality development, which is understood as a conscious dismantling of our more or less primitively integrated (egocentric) individuality, and replacing it with a consciously chosen and created (altruistic) personality.

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Personality development, if done right, inevitably sets us on a collision course with the unjust world in which we live, and with everything that is primitive, unevolved and destructive within ourselves. One of the major developmental dynamisms—i.e, the internal forces guiding our individual growth as described in TPD—is positive maladjustment: a lack of adjustment to the world as is, guided by our vision of what ought to be which turns us into eternal misfits, “guests of reality,” to use the title of Par Lagerkvist’s story. Positive maladjustment is always rooted in universal human values embedded in our conscience and gives rise to our protest, internal and external, against the inhumane status quo. Sometimes this protest can take a form of non-cooperation or silence, or even mental illness, but it is still positive and expressive of better mental health than unreflective adjustment to what is. Jiddu Krishnamurti reminded us that “[i]t is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.” This maladjustment in turn awakens other developmental dynamisms such as guilt, shame, astonishment with oneself, disquietude with oneself, subject-object in oneself, and others that create the basis for transcending our biological and social limitations through personality growth.

This sort of growth, from primitive egocentrism/narcissism to conscious altruism, can be also expected to some degree in human groups and entire societies inspired and guided by moral exemplars. We can see it clearly in the social and political changes which expanded human rights and affirmed human values like freedom, equality, and justice that took place thanks to the work of Gandhi, MLK, or Anna Walentynowicz, the mother of *Solidarity* movement in Poland.

While the full scope and depth of TPD are impossible to summarize in one article, one aspect that begs special attention here is its conceptualization of human society on the spectrum of emotional development.

TPD posits five levels of development—the table in this article shows how humanity fits on those levels:

1. **primary integration**, where a pursuit of biological imperatives and unreflective adjustment to social norms rules;
2. **unilevel disintegration**, the time of ambivalencies and ambipendencies, intense inner conflicts between equally valued, usually unilevel options;
3. **spontaneous multilevel disintegration**, when we see inner conflicts between *what is* and *what ought to be*; a first awakening of conscience;
4. **organized multilevel disintegration**, which marks the full awakening of conscience and beginning of inner transformation;
5. **secondary integration**, where a sense of purpose and meaning derived from the realization of higher values rule and guide us, harmoniously, toward transcending our biological and psychological type; inner peace; universal compassion and empathy are predominant developmental dynamisms.

As we can see, this multilevel spectrum of character / personality development is also a spectrum of conscience, since our conscience is the active ingredient which makes development possible.

The health of a society can be measured by the number of people who have achieved the level of personality, and by the emotional and moral health of the average people inhabiting the so-called statistical norm.

Dabrowski talks about the “overactive conscience” of psychoneurotics, who, endowed with multiple forms of overexcitability, feel and respond to life and its problems more deeply and acutely. This “oversensitivity” leads to frequent frustrations, pain, inner conflicts, doubts, and traumas, but also signals the existence of and activates developmental forces that enable healing and growth. The active conscience is an indispensable condition of emotional development. Dabrowski considered it a separate developmental dynamism and called it *the third factor* (*the first factor* is our biological endowment, and *the second factor* are the influences of our social world). Advanced emotional and personality development is impossible without the third factor; with it, it is possible to achieve *personality*, a term Dabrowski reserved only for this highly developed level of functioning.

The health of a society can be measured by the number of people who have achieved the level of personality, and by the emotional and moral health of the average people inhabiting the so-called statistical norm. The greater the number of moral exemplars, and the greater the number of average people who are closer in their character profiles to psychoneurotics (ie., those folks with an overactive conscience), the healthier the society. Unfortunately, in most human societies the so-called average people are closer in their (lack of) development to psychopaths, as Dabrowski noted.

Psychopathy: “The Greatest Obstacle to Development of Individuals and Societies.”*

Dabrowski was one of the first mental health experts who tried to bring the world’s attention to the dangers posed by psychopaths. His writings show an astute understanding of the effect that psychopathic individuals have on society. He warned that “our general inability to recognize the psychological type of psychopaths causes immense suffering, mass terror, violent oppression, genocide and the decay of civilization” (Dabrowski 1973). He himself suffered persecution in political regimes created by psychopaths in power. Imprisoned and mistreated first by the Nazis and then by communists, he saw his work impeded and its fruits destroyed, along with his reputation and professional standing under communism. Nevertheless, he persisted.

Dabrowski’s views on psychopathy, which is characterized by an absent conscience, and its (clinical) opposite, psychoneurosis, defined by an “overactive conscience,” are distinctly applicable to this moment in history, so let’s spend a moment on them here.

Psychopaths are incapable of grasping or experiencing higher values, while psychoneurotics are preoccupied with them to the detriment of their “successful” adjustment to everyday life and its requirements.

Psychopathy is a highly integrated character structure where intelligence is subsumed under primitive drives: for sex, money, and power. Psychoneurotics, in contrast, are nearly chronically disintegrated, as their increased sensitivity (overexcitability) weakens their primitive drives through introduction of conflicting motives and ideas, inhibitions, inner doubts, and ambivalencies. Their primitive drives, if present at all, are usually engaged in an inner battle with an overactive conscience, leading to much inner turmoil, which tends to subside with the growth of personality in those predisposed to it.

Psychopaths are incapable of grasping or experiencing higher values, while psychoneurotics are preoccupied with them to the detriment of their “successful” adjustment to everyday life and its requirements. That’s one reason why psychopaths, unlike psychoneurotics, are usually viewed favorably (and erroneously) by society as good leaders since they present as strong, decisive and “level-headed.” Yes, they are strong and decisive, but driven by unilevel motives—egocentric, primitive, and thus destructive—and their actions bring much suffering to others.

Psychoneurotics, on the other hand, are seen as impractical and ineffective, lost in reality, and/or “pathologically” maladjusted to it, since their motivations are “not from this world,” rooted as they are in the realm of the highest ideals which their oversensitive, overexcitable and conflicted nature cannot always, if ever, translate into everyday reality.

“Psychopaths have aims but not values. Psychoneurotics have values but not aims. Personalities have both values and aims.”

Dabrowski said that “[p]sychopaths have aims but not values. Psychoneurotics have values but not aims. Personalities have both values and aims” (1970, p. 160). One of developmental goals for psychoneurotics is to learn how to overcome their doubts and inhibitions and put their idealism with its values into consistent practice. This quest, not surprisingly, is what defines developmental struggles of all idealists, creatives, and reformers world over.

Periods of social disintegration provide just the right opportunity to do so.

In times of social strife and upheaval, when the going gets tough because human values come under threat from conscienceless individuals and systems, psychoneurotics often find their mettle and proper role—and goals—in society. Thanks to their lived understanding of human values, they are capable of seeing both dangers of current events and often the correct ways of counteracting them. And so, for instance, people who may have lingered in a limbo of their own inner conflicts and doubts, spring to righteous action when confronted with the threat of encroaching tyranny, organizing and participating in a multifaceted resistance movement. We see this happening today on a large scale in America and the world.

Alongside the external threats posed by oppressive political regimes that engender rebellion, situations that spur positive disintegration in predisposed individuals include disappointments and traumas that lead us to a confrontation with our shadow—individual and collective—and a critical re-examination of our way of life. This confrontation, painful and difficult by necessity, enables emotional and spiritual growth of individuals first, and then entire groups of people. It is the process of making darkness visible, so that we can better understand and tame it to aid our development.

The resultant disquietude, guilt, and shame—feelings that are much maligned and unwelcome in our narcissistic society—bring us down to the level of truth, which also contains a possibility of redemption and transformation. This happens through restoration of our most important and cherished values in our daily life.

The journey to Hades must be undertaken if we are to see our true nature and choose, freely, its aspects worth cultivating, while abandoning the unworthy ones, which we have allowed to take over our lives for too long.

Such disintegrative experiences teach us that once we confront and comprehend the darkness residing in our hearts, we will choose to replace it with love and compassion. But as long as we lurch toward ritual sacrifice of The Others, instead of examining the fear, rage, and hatred that drive it, individual and mass scale encounters with our shadow will keep repeating with a frightening regularity, enlarging our misery to better direct our attention to what's going on.

Thanks to Trump/ism, we are entering, or rather opening and deepening, a period of our collective "dark night of the soul," which is a prolonged confrontation with our shadow. That journey to Hades must be undertaken if we are to see our true nature and choose, freely, its aspects worth cultivating, while abandoning the unworthy ones, which we have allowed to take over our lives for too long.

By opening for all to see the chasm between the primitive, valueless existence of psychopaths and their ilk, and the conscience-driven lives of exemplars of the highest levels of emotional development—or even just the "regular people" who have not shut down their conscience—this confrontation presents a unique opportunity for personal and collective growth. It becomes as clear as never before what's most important in our short lives on this planet—and for the conscience-endowed, it won't be the primitive goals of psychopaths. We can no longer deny this truth; but if for some reason we still do, and we are not character impaired, our positive disintegration will continue to manifest through our unsettled conscience.

With the emerging clarity comes freedom and resolve to reclaim and put our cherished values in action—because that's where they really matter—with the positively maladjusted leading the way. As difficult as this process is, it is a beginning of a much needed positive change for many, if not for all.

References

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