It’s Getting There



Shadows are falling and I’ve been here all day
It’s too hot to sleep, time is running away
Feel like my soul has turned into steel
I’ve still got the scars that the sun didn’t heal
There’s not even room enough to be anywhere
It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there
— Bob

I’d love to take a cavalier tone here, deliver a wry slice of the buffoonery that is He, Trump<fn>™ Charlie Pierce</fn>. The man is comedy gold, a walking punch line, from his barely concealed groping of Ivanka, to his hair and skin color, to his inability to let go a grudge, to his Mussolini-esque lip pursing. <fn>Someone wearing my eyeglasses emphasized this last tic during last Mardi Gras. It was yooge. Way ahead of the curve.</fn>



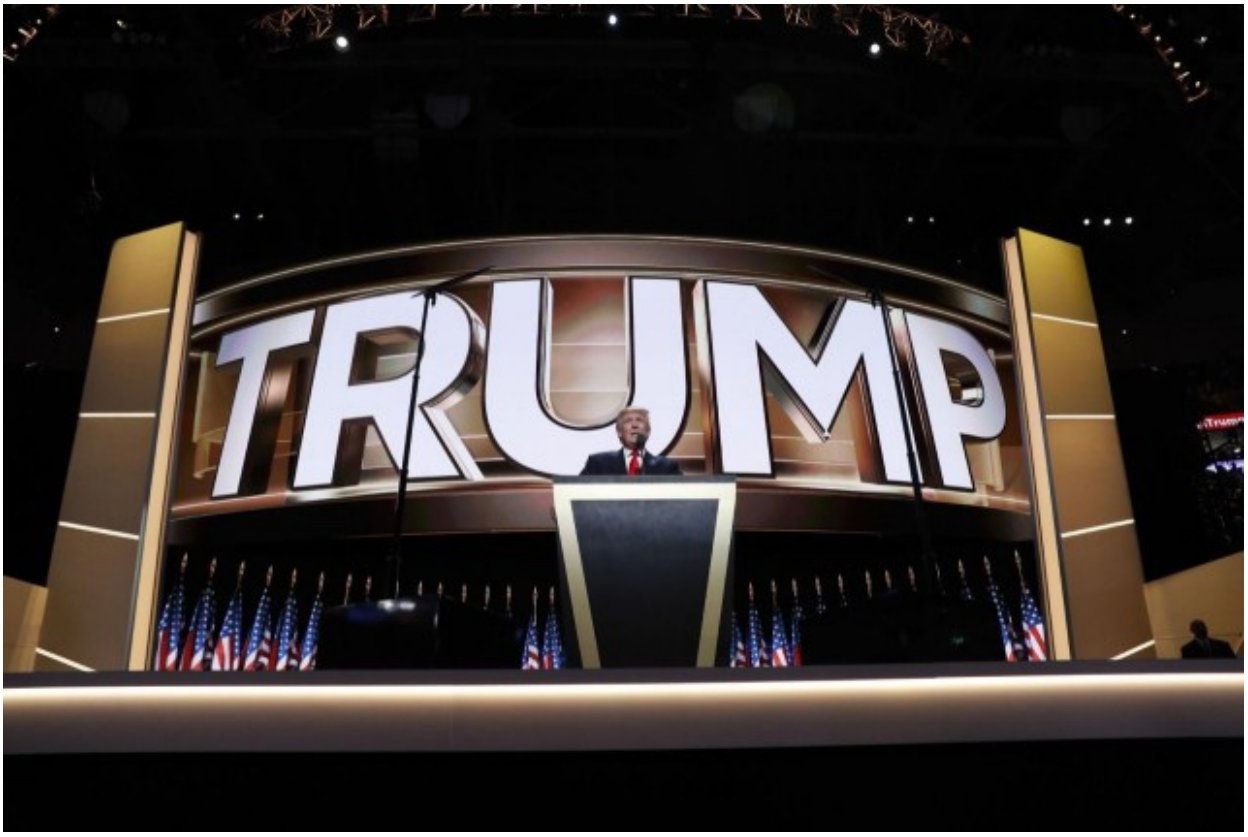
The Writer as Trump, Friend of da Jieuxs – Photo by Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee

But mocking Trump is just not enough. Things are just a tad too dire. Face it: one of two people has a non-zero chance of becoming the nation's 45th president. Neither is named Jill or Gary.<fn>Get over it.</fn> Given the peculiarities of American electoral politics, one of them is named Trump.

I feel like I'm watching some unholy mashup of *Seven Days in May*, *Manchurian Candidate,* and *The Man in the High Castle.* It can't happen here? This time, I wonder.

His acceptance speech in Cleveland was … was … well, what the hell was that, anyway? He began by saying this:

> *Friends, delegates and fellow Americans: I humbly and gratefully accept your nomination for the presidency of the United States.*



Humble

It was touted ahead of time as hewing to the model of Nixon's 1968 acceptance. (My favorite Nixon scholar, Rick Perlstein, explains here how badly Trump missed the mark.) Trump knows that his only hope for winning is to amplify and exaggerate our fears, to scare enough people into welcoming authoritarian rule to save us from threats at home and abroad, threats to our "way of life" and "our values". Like Nixon in '68, the litany of horror Trump describes is impressively dire. But unlike Nixon's list, it is largely fictional. A few examples: crime is down, cop killings are down, employment is up, ACA is working well, and so on. Our scorched Thunderdome? He pretty much just made it up.

Fact checkers at work on Trump's ravings

Even more telling, Nixon understood and acknowledged that these were problems that we would have to solve "together". Trump had a slightly different perspective:

> *I ALONE CAN FIX IT.*

This theme came around several times, and it is perhaps the most telling component of the whole crazed diatribe. Trump sees himself as a messianic figure, an authoritarian genius who will cure everything that ails us simply by being his awesome self.

> *On January 20th of 2017, the day after I take the oath of office, Americans will finally wake up in a country where the laws of the United States are enforced.*

Because right now, and as far as memory can serve, America is a charred hellscape where chaos reigns supreme. And only one man can save us.



More humility, with a hearty dash of spittle-flecked anger

He yelled. He balled his fists. His face contorted and reddened. He started loud and got louder, more angry.

And then he lowered his tone and said this:

I AM YOUR VOICE.

I truly lost my bearings at this point. Is he a con artist, delivering his practiced patter to sting an easy mark? Is it all an act, or does this guy truly believe our world is in the depths of hell and he is the only man who can save us.

It doesn't really matter. We now have a know-nothing narcissist within hailing distance of the Oval Office. He is clearly unqualified, and unhinged. Whether he's running a long con or is "just" a demented egomaniac (not that these are mutually exclusive), this is dangerous territory

It's unlikely, but this tiny fingered schmuck could win. He starts with a reliable ~40% of the vote, people who love them some authoritarianism, along with folks whose tribal affiliation to Republicanism means they just have to vote for him. On the other side, Clinton has a reliable ~40% base who love them some Democratic tribalism. And as always, that leaves the mushy middle of 20 million or so people who are unsure, undecided. These are, for the most part, what the political profession calls low information voters.<fn>Actually, that label applies to a huge portion of the dedicated party folks, too. On both sides.</fn> People who will make up their minds based on their feelings. Who would you rather have a beer with?

A few hours ago, a candidate for state representative knocked on my door.<fn>Really! This is not some Thomas Friedman cab driver gimmick.</fn> Nice guy, friendly. Republican, and in a town this size, basically a neighbor. We got to talking Trump. He's not a happy guy on this, says there's no way he can vote for a "looney", and is pretty sad about the state of his party.<fn>He also had unkind things to say about Little Marco Rubio. I liked him even more then.</fn> I asked him if he would vote for Hillary. He kind of shook his head and said, no, he didn't think he could do it.

I asked him if, knowing that Trump is a dangerous nut, and that one of two people was going to be President, and that Florida is a tight state electorally, he didn't think it was his responsibility to do what he could to keep the nut out of office. He was remarkably open to the idea when phrased that way.

I had the same conversation with my fab daughter this morning, a disappointed Bernster who "just isn't feeling Hillary". I get it. It's her first election, and she wants it to be a righteous experience. And I get that many Bernie supporters are disappointed and feeling left out. Been there.

Much has been said about prominent GOPers refusing to attend the convention. Several big name Republicans have announced that they will absolutely not vote for Trump, but like my new pal and state house candidate, they can't bring themselves to vote for Clinton. And much is made of their integrity, their principled opposition.

I say bullshit. How bad does it have to get to renounce your party's presidential nominee? Pretty fucking terrible, that's how. Yet that's not terrible enough to actually do something to keep him out of the office you already admit that he is unqualified for? What more do you need?

Republicans have a shitty choice, but it has a silver lining. I'm looking for prominent Republicans – come on JEB! – to take a stand and say, "This guy is dangerous, he does not represent the values of our party or our country, and I am voting for his opponent. In four years, I will campaign hard to re-take the White House from Hillary Clinton, but for now, she is the only viable choice."

This is the way to rebuild a sober and rational party. I know too many Republicans who acknowledge that the party has become extremist. They want it to change. Here's their chance to chase to tea partiers, the white supremacists, the

obstructionists, the bomb throwers.

For Hillary-averse voters who consider themselves liberal, or progressive, or leftist syndicalist whatevers, it's time to suck it up and support Clinton. Proclaim loudly that Trump is just too dangerous, but dammit Clinton, we're gonna bulldog you and hold your feet to the fire. Find another Bernie to primary her in 2020 if she let's you down too badly.

I get that there are people who really, really, *really* do not like Hillary Clinton. Personally, I'm fine with her; it feels like a continuation of Obama, and I can't get too outraged over that. I'm fairly certain she will disappoint and outrage me at some point, just like every other president in my lifetime.<fn>Some way more than others, natch.</fn>

But I'm comfortable with that because I know it is inevitable. For some folks, the idea of voting the lesser of two evils is too much to bear, and a principled purity vote is more emotionally satisfying. Or maybe you're thinking of staying home, like your crestfallen GOP counterparts who didn't get they nominee the wanted. Above it all.

Whether you're a disappointed progressive or an disappointed conservative, let me say with utmost respect:

> *Fuck your feelings. Use your head.*

Trump is a clear danger. We cannot afford to indulge in preening and moral purity this year. The stakes are too high. Vote, goddamit. And don't waste it.

(Full Disclosure: I voted Bernie in the primary, fwiw. And I like Tim Kaine just fine.)

A Nice Gooey Cluster



It sure is clustery.

I've been a gavel-to-gavel convention junkie since 1972. I admit that most of the time it is tedious, pretentious, and a towering load of bullshit. The joke that "politics is show business for ugly people" has been around as long as I can remember, and my enjoyment comes from my uber-geeky obsession with US history and politics. Growing up under the Nixon raj was like living in a Shakespearean tragedy, so I've always found it damned entertaining and compelling. Mea culpa.

Conventions are tightly scripted reality shows, a cross between *Survivor* and those cheesy behind-the-athlete vignettes that have made the Olympics all but unwatchable. Predictable, cliched kitsch with an occasional surprise twist. But sometimes, the machinery breaks down and the mask comes off to reveal the reptile aliens underneath. It happened in '68 and '72 with the Democrats, and in '64 and '76 for the Republicans. It reveals much about the national id and the undercurrents of tension and conflict that are behind the events that we always scratch our heads over and think, "how could such a thing happen?" here.

This year's Republican National Convention has been a parade of reptile aliens. It almost beggars analysis.

What can you say when the speaker who displayed the greatest

integrity (maybe the only speaker who displayed *any* integrity) was a charmless theocrat from Texas who frightens his own children?



No, Daddy, no! Icky Daddy.

What can you say when the convention attendees act as though they are in a remake of *The Crucible*?



The delegation from Mississippi. Burn the witch!

I could go on, and I have. I ‘ve twitterized to excess this week, one-liner *bon mots* flowing like cheap wine. The spectacle is perfect for it. Moose and squirrel. Quisling

taint lickers like Walker, Christie, and Little Marco. The weaponization of grief. The cynical intonation of MLK in defense of state's rights. Rudy Nosferatu.



A verb, a noun, 9-11.

What this week's spectacle does not lend itself to is any kind of extended, coherent analysis. It is simply too fractured, a broken mirror reflection of what at least 40% of our nation perceives as reality, with so many overlapping fault lines as to defy focus. And that, truly, may be the point.

It may be that the splintered, kaleidoscopic texture of the past three nights was intentional. So many shiny objects! So many "did you see that?" diversions! And such a cavalcade of stars! Duck Dynasty! Chachi! GE Smith!

It's every bit as dazzling as the 4 a.m. shift on the old Jerry Lewis Telethons. Yeah, I watched that, too, every year. Why? Well, it was one night when the electric picture radio box had more than a test pattern after midnight, and it was a holiday, and if you were lucky, some hapless Vegas crooner would lose his toupee mid-song, or Jerry would doze off or start hallucinating and babbling and crying. Just like this year's RNC.



~~Actual photo of Chris Christie thinking "My god, what have I done?"~~ Jerry Lewis at 4 a.m.

Horrific displays of stiff Caucasian dancing and call-and-response insanity? Stagecraft gone awry? Valium-addled rantings, video screens and microphones misfiring, speakers crying? Messrs. K and H assure the public their production will be second to none. I love it.

When I go to a concert and the wheels start to come off, I get a thrill. How will everybody respond? Sometimes, the recovery takes the performance to a level nobody had imagined, pure magic. Other times, recovery is rough, but respectable. And sometimes, nothing can be done, everybody just has to pretend things are okay, while the band plays *Waltzing Matilda*. Onward to death and glory!

I've pretty much avoided writing about He, Trump, aka The Donald, The Short Fingered Vulgarian, &c. It all pretty much gets written without my help. The rest of the GOP clown car? So much protoplasm, so little substance. The entire campaign was like watching a circus camp for incontinent toddlers, like watching a stubborn remnant refusing to go away no matter how

many times you flush. Fascinating, but more than a little revolting. Just not terribly interesting to write about.

Plus, also, too, it's easy to get distracted by trivialities like i) Natasha's plagiarized speech or ii) whether a professional gasbag did or did not give a Nazi salute to Trump.<fn>i) Who cares? and ii) No, she didn't. Just stop.</fn> Why do the Trump lads look like understudies in an off-off-Broadway production of *American Psycho*?<fn>Because Patrick Bateman is a role model. Duh.</fn> Will Tiffany ever get her Daddy's attention?<fn>Tragically, no.</fn> Does Marcocito's suit retain its shape through a wire frame or by hot gas inflation?<fn>Bet on the gas.</fn>

One almost forgets that the reason this shitshow is happening at all is because one of our two choices for president is a litigation happy megalomaniac who lies as easily as most people fart. A grandstander who has no qualifications, a grifter, a phony, a narcissistic horror. He knows nothing of policy, or how governance works, or even the basic facts of America's role in the world. He's the drunk uncle at Thanksgiving, the sot at the end of the bar that everybody moves away from. A barking mad street ranter waving pamphlets and yelling "I've got evidence!"

You may hate her, and her policies, but Hillary is at least qualified to serve. Lawyer. Senator. Secretary of State. You gotta go back to Madison for that kind of resume cred. Trump? It's laughable on its face. A sane electorate would not elect this guy King of Cartoons. And the polls say he's pretty much a snowball in hell.

But it's not enough to let me sleep soundly. I've seen elections go wrong before. It *can* happen here.

For a generation or three that has grown up with the electric picture machine, Trump is a familiar amalgam of years of iconic representation. He's Ralph Cramden and Fred Flintstone

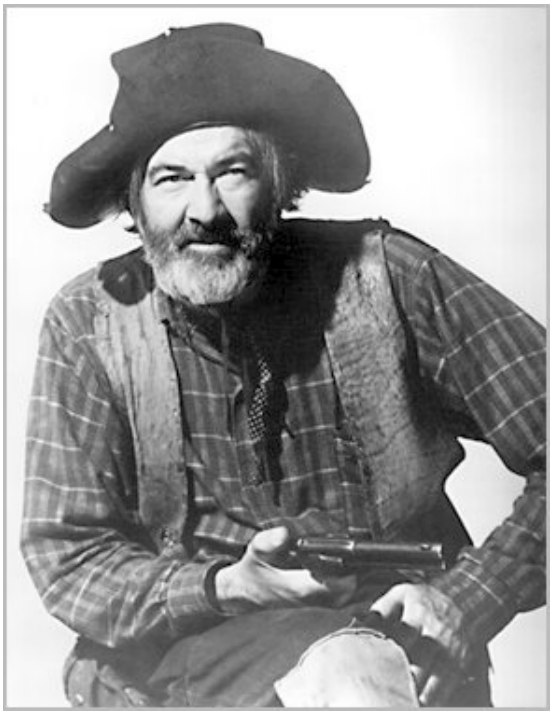
and Archie and the predators of the reality show circuit. He's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* and a towering member of the glitterati club. He's been in your home, in one form or another, for decades. <fn>Hilary has been the star of a reality show for 25 years, too. She's inevitably cast as the villain.</fn> He's *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest* and *All My Children*. Especially *All My Children*.

Back in the days of Reagan<fn>He ruined everything, you know. You can look it up.</fn> and *Flock of Haircuts*, one of my guilty pleasures was this daily soaper. It was overwrit and overwrought, pretty plainly terrible in every measurable way. But it knew the future. Erica Kane, played by Susan Lucci for 41 years<fn>Respect!!!!</fn>, was a centerpiece character, a "celebrity" who was "famous" and who had legions of "fans", but who never seemed to actually do anything to become famous. She was simply famous for being famous. This is decades ahead of a Kardashian or a *Housewives of…* scenario.

This, my friends, was Philip K Dick level prognosticating. It's no accident that a considerable percentage of the convention speakers gained their fame through reality teevee.<fn>Plus a few grifters from the pyramid marketing realm, a little celebrity subset of its own. But I digress.</fn>

These day, celebrity *qua* celebrity is so commonplace as to be unremarkable. Viral videos, reality shows, all that. It means that anybody can be famous, qualifications be damned. And here's a goodly chunk of the Trump appeal: anybody, by damn, can be president!

> *"So what that he don't know NATO from NAFTA…he's got common sense, dalgurnit, and he's ain't beholden. Why, he's just like me! Now hold my beer and watch me shoot this skeeter offa ma nose!"*



An actual Trump delegate.
No, really.

There is an unmovable base that thinks that what is going on in one of the only two parties that matter<fn>Get over it, Greens and Libturds.</fn> is fine and fucking dandy, a really good direction for our commonwealth to pursue with fanatical vigor. Trump has tapped into something deep and toxic, and he is not shy about letting the beast out to play. He knows how to cultivate the resentment and fear that motivates a big portion of our population. Higher angels? What do their Q ratings look like? Losers.

On top of that, there is another significant percentage of people who will stroke their chins thoughtfully and say, oh yes, certainly, that Trump fellow is a bit rough around the edges, but oh my fucking god that Hilary Clinton, at least Trump didn't {hide emails, smuggle cocaine, kill Vincent Foster, help Bill rape women, &c.} AND SHE IS EVIL AND SHE MUST BE STOPPED. People who, more in sorrow than in anger, will vote to Make America Great Again.

<fn>Sure and okay, Hilary and the Dems have a solid 40% to start with, too, a base that marches just as obediently.

Tribal markers and all that. I’m not blind to the faults of the other side, I’ll be watching their shitshow just as closely. I imagine there will be plenty of high-larity and contumely to share.</fn>

Here’s where shit gets real.<fn>as the young people say, via emoji, apparently, but whatevs</fn>Despite the fact that, by any reasonable measure, there is only one major party candidate that is fit to occupy the office of presidency, this is actually a competitive race. There are purportedly “reasonable” people (looking at you JEB!) who refuse to say, “Country above party! This is a nightmare. Wake up!” It ain’t gonna happen, the tribal markers are too sharp.

As with the last several elections, it comes down to what are quaintly known as “low information” voters. People of the land. The common clay of America.



You know….morons.

Here’s where it can go all wrong. In 2000, there was the idea going around that Bush would be someone you’d rather have a beer with. He was a regular guy, just like me! Already you can see the effort to cast Trump and his spawn as salt of the earth jes’ folk, with Hilary as the epitome of elitism.

Ah, but he's a businessman. A celebrity businessman. A *rich*<fn>Perhaps.</fn> celebrity businessman. Trifecta jackpot! The cult of the business titan works in his favor, even as we are asked to think of him as a regular guy. And he's rich, just like I could be if it weren't for that Obama fella. In a Kardashianized world, simply being rich and famous is qualification enough. The details will get cleaned up in post-production.

Give him points: he's the savviest manipulator of the media monkeys we've ever seen. A bona fee-day organ grinder with a chain attached to all their nose rings. He played his opponents and the party grandees like a tent full of chumps at the carnival. The Trump Rollicking Medicine Show rolls on, and we can only hope that enough people will see the con and outnumber the marks. There's no guarantee, so step right up…

I'll tune in again tonight, a chump at the edge of my seat waiting to see what kind of weaponized resentments he will offer to a crowd that looks all too ready to roll some tumbrels and pitch some forks. I'll curse and tweet and go to bed ennervated and distressed, hooked on this year's reality teevee spectacle. The ratings will be boffo.

Disruptive Sharing Pt. 3



We live in the golden era of consumer bliss.

A few mouse clicks and we can sit back and wait for front-door delivery of everything we never knew we wanted. At a discount. And without the nuisance of having to spend time actually talking to a clerk or salesperson. Eventually, those pesky clerks will experience the joy of excess leisure time as robots assume their non-essential functions and the brick-and-mortar stores die away. Disruption!

We can tap a few ephemeral pixels on our smartphones and, lo and behold, a smiling driver in a late-model car will miraculously materialize to drive us quickly and safely to our destination. Your driver might even offer you a breath mint or some other treat to make your ride more enjoyable as you bask in the redolence of sandalwood-scented air freshening technology. Sharing!

We can find a place to stay in a far-away land, someplace that feels local and may even be/have been an actual residence inhabited by an actual local. Atmosphere! Authenticity™! And best of all…you usually get to dodge taxes and fees that a hotel would charge. Disruption AND Sharing!

What's not to like?

At first glance, not much. But there's more to these disruptions than meets the eye.

Pretty much everybody understands how Amazon has ~~undermined~~ (sorry) disrupted the standard brick and mortar retail economy. The costs in lost jobs and local economic activity have been enormous. Defenders of disruptive capitalism would point to the epic success and enormous popularity of Amazon as its obvious justification.

That cool flat you rented in New Orleans? Very possibly it used to be the home of a family who eventually had to move because the Return on Investment from renting the place to

tourists far outstrips the RoI on renting to a regular citizen. Under the logic of the marketplace, this is a right and just outcome. Never mind that the displaced resident might be the chef or shopkeeper or musician whose work made your trip so *delightful* (assuming the cafe or retail store has not already closed under pressure from mega-chains…and the musician, playing for tips, watched you listen for 20 minutes and walk away without dropping any coin in the hat) now commutes to New Orleans from somewhere like Houma or Tickfaw or Slidell because real estate values – already stressed by an influx of hipsters, urban pioneers, and (dog love 'em) carpetbagging entrepreneurs – have grown increasingly distorted and unaffordable.

Sure, and ok, but what could possibly be wrong with letting people freely enter into an arrangement whereby an innovative and disruptive company connects them with people who need a ride, that they will pay for, and that allows a go-getting driver to make "up to $75 and hour or more!"? As we saw in part 1 of this trilogy, Uber and Lyft are able to offer lower prices and nicer rides largely through their ability to exempt themselves from governmental regulations and to classify their employees as not-really-employees-at-all.

But even if we could ignore all these factors – which is easy to do so long as the disruption is disrupting someone who is not you – the biggest problem with the Amazons and Ubers and such is that they have achieved such dominating size and power. Again, defenders of the prevailing market paradigm will point to the success and size of these relatively new companies as justification in and of itself, striking the argument that those who create value deserve to enjoy the rewards of their innovation.

All well and good. But perhaps Amazon and Uber and Airbnb and PayPal and such do not actually *create* any value<fn>Distinct here from the convenience it offers.</fn> to speak of, but merely facilitate its transfer from one or more pockets of the

economy into their own very large pockets. Does Uber *create* value or simply profit off of the work and equipment of its not-employees? Does Amazon create value or simply extract it from publishers and brick and mortar booksellers that it can knuckle due to its size and market dominance?

What a killjoy. Mea culpa.

Besides, there are plenty of brick and mortar businesses doing really well. Try to deny the success of restaurant mega-chains or superstores. Every time a new chain opens in our town, the lines to try the world's greatest biscuit or most anodyne Tex-Mex stretch around the block. We like it cheap and fast.<fn>Remember: "Fast. Good. Cheap. Pick two."</fn> But these enterprises generally rely upon two factors to be able to sell cheap at a profit. First, the sheer scale of Mickey D's or KFC allows them to beat down the prices of the goods they purchase. Second, they are able to get away with paying sub-living wages to their employees, who in turn receive subsidies from governments (state and federal) to almost make up the difference. In other words, these juggernauts of capital are relying on taxpayer subsidies. The people who are enjoying fast and cheap are often paying for it twice.<fn>Also, too, the employees of the suppliers, forced to lower prices to retain their mega-chain clients, turn around and drive down wages of their own employees. Bigger bugs eat little bugs. Little bugs eat littler bugs, and so ad infintum. But that's ok. Ain't no bugs on me!</fn>

Adding insult to injury is the fact that the regulatory hurdles for opening a small business are extraordinarily difficult for local, independent entrepreneurs. For large chains, teeming with armies of clerical and legal staff, these challenges are about as daunting as a flea fart. In every aspect, their scale offers significant advantage.

And again, the free market evangelist will likely consider a business's scale, and its attendant market advantages, as

examples of the “common sense” dictum that RoI and growth are proof of the value of an enterprise. And given how that Randian worldview has managed to take root, not too many folks bother to question beyond that premise.

Luckily, though, there are some willing to scratch the surface of these arguments. The Summer 2016 issue of The American Prospect features a terrific article called *Confronting the Parasite Economy.* It’s a hard look at how companies who survive on underpaying their employees are in fact undermining the economic health of the entire system. This might be easy to ignore if it were coming from the usual socialist/leftist critique factory.<fn>Yeah, our side has one, too. It is, alas, not as effective as the VRWC echo chamber.</fn> But the author of this study is Nick Hanauer, an entrepreneur and one of the earliest investors in Amazon. No wild-eyed fanatic, this guy. But he knows which way the wind blows, and he’s long warned that unrestrained accumulations of wealth – and the power it brings – will lead to the collapse of economy overall.

Hanauer has founded and funded a progressive think tank with an eye to countering the kind of right-wing chop shops that have proliferated over the past 30-40 years. And he is making a forceful case that the relentless drive to slash prices and suppress wages is going to end with the disappearance of the middle class, with a great divide between people who will have some semblance of discretionary income – which is certainly the most important driver of a healthy capitalist economy – and the people who decide whether to buy food or medicine.<fn>As Krugman often reminds us, “My spending is your income, and your spending is my income”, and round and round we go. If the vast majority have nothing to spend, whither your income?</fn>

Hanauer is one example of an entrepreneur putting his assets to work confronting what he sees as a social problem. Bill Gates is giving away gazillions of dollars to alleviate disease and “improve” education. Zuckerberg is in on the act,

too, establishing a foundation for good works. It’s arguable that the Koch Brothers do the same thing through their donations to arts organizations, public broadcasting, &c.

You got a problem with that?

If not, maybe you should. The very fact that such a small group of people, accountable only to their own whims and desires, have the ability to create such massive disruption in the realms of social policy is more than a little too much like the Gilded Age beneficence of Carnegie and Gould and Morgan and Rockefeller. Further, the outsized influence of, say, the money Gates promises to schools who adopt his vision of what constitutes “better” leads to a headlong rush to get a piece of that action by adopting whatever foolishness is attached. Here again, the remora swarm the stream of cash whether the outcomes are beneficial, harmful, or just another exercise in hand-waving and incantation.<fn>Spoiler alert: hand-waving and incantation.</fn>

The Cult of the Unicorn Entrepreneur — distinct from actual good work done by real ‘treps — points to the big winners, the Zuckerbergs and the Cubans and the Trumps, as examples of this-could-be-you inspiration, the modern equivalent of the old Ragged Dick bootstrap myths. And yeah, it could be you. But for all the romanticism of a college dropout becoming the richest man in the world, it’s worth remembering that these were guys who dropped out of Harvard and the like, and who started life with a pretty decent pair of boots and straps up with which to pull themselves. This is not to suggest that the circumstances of their birth made it ‘easy’ for them to achieve great wealth; they have worked their tails off. But don’t kid yourself; telling the average kid on lunch program assistance that she can become the next Zuckerberg is not just unlikely, but somewhat cruel.

The Cult of the Unicorn Entrepreneur (CUE!) is not objectionable because it urges people to follow their dreams,

or attempt the seemingly impossible against all odds, or to work their asses off to actualize an innovative idea. It is objectionable because it has been pressed into service in the Makers vs. Takers propaganda campaign that leads people to declare “I built that”, to glorify the go-it-alone ethos of the Galtian superhero. Worse: to justify the sufferings of millions because they “just couldn’t cut it”.

The bitterest irony is that progressively greater concentrations of wealth and market power in the hands of a few makes it all the less likely that the small, home-grown ‘trep will succeed. Tech megaliths are legendary for buying up the competition and killing it, and if the plucky small ‘trep won’t sell, well then there are armies of lawyers on staff who will happily drive Mr and Mrs Plucky into the ground through legal action.

<fn>And let’s just save for later the spectacle of entrepreneurial Leviathans using their wealth to finance speculative torts to punish people or concerns they do not like. Sure, if Gawker were a printed rag it would be unworthy to hang in an outhouse. But to give a Peter Thiel the power to break an organization that should be protected by the First Amendment raises all kinds of gnarly worries, free speech-wise. Thiel might have every right to go after an enemy. But his outsized wealth and power makes it pretty much an unfair fight all the way down. Also, too…fuck Gawker. It would be tough to pick sides on this if I didn’t feel about the First Amendment the way the bullet fondlers feel about the Second.</fn> <fn>And before anyone tries to say that what Thiel did is the same as what the ACLU has done for decades…just no. The ACLU is outfront and open about all their legal work, even when they defend Nazis. Thiel was hiding in the shadows. Not the same thing.</fn> <fn>This is also a guy who wrote, “I no longer believe that freedom and *democracy* are compatible.”</fn>

Our society lavishes inordinate praise on people who have been

lucky enough to accumulate a fortune. Some of these folks have earned it.<fn>More or less. I tend to agree with Fran Liebovitz on this score: “No one earns $100 million. You steal $100 million.” But that’s another argument for another day.</fn> Some people have become wealthy through nothing more than dumb luck or through accident of birth, born on third base with a silver spoon in their mouth. Others gain their wealth through a scorched earth practice of acquire-and-dismantle or disaster capitalism. Many more attain wealth through blatant fraud.<fn>Remember: Rick Scott was a business *genius*.</fn>

Recall the time when Ken Lay was besties with the President and graced the cover of all the popular business mags, which serve as the *People* and *Vogue* magazines of the 1% crowd and their acolytic wannabe followers. These fawning peddlers of hagiographic bootstrapper mythology — along with their breathless counterparts at CNBC, FOX Business, &c. — are only too happy to help us understand that entrepreneurial geniuses like Mark Cuban and Jack Welch and Lee Iacocca (and even the inexcusable Carly Fiorina) are role models, icons of greatness.

Anyone who wonders how we find ourselves pondering the very real possibility of a tin-plated grifter like Donald Trump as our next president need look no farther than this insane devotion to the concept that extreme wealth indicates extreme merit.

In the end, Your Narrator holds a strangely optimistic faith that any real improvement in our social and economic relations lies in the hands of entrepreneurs<fn>And let’s go ahead and include in this group people working in government and non-profit realms who bring entrepreneurial spirit to their missions.</fn> who treat their entrepreneurship as a central component of their commitment to be responsible citizens in pursuit of our common-wealth.

It will not come through the largesse of a Gates or Zuckerberg or Koch. It will be because we create a class of entrepreneurs who understand that their role is to improve the common-wealth, people who want to do well and good, people who do not view extreme accumulations as the sole measure of success in a world where you can never be too rich or thin.

It will also require a shift in attitude as to the role of government, by citizens and gummit employees alike. Maybe it's time for government to behave entrepreneurially<fn>And dog knows, that's a tricky balancing act, mos def.</fn> and for our citizenry to drop the all-too-easy stance of anti-government scepticism, to stake a claim in a process that, admittedly, they have been told is closed to them, doesn't work anyway, and here's a shiny object go away now.

Here's where the pessimism can't help but gain a toehold. The Gospel of the Free Market has had an impressive run over the past 35 years. Government is bad, you see. It strangles initiative and innovation through excessive taxation and overreaching regulation. These precepts are so internalized into the conventional wisdom, into *common sense*, as to make anyone who contradicts the scripture appear as a Quixote-ish heretic.

This sacred wisdom is, to ~~turn~~ steal a phrase, all my balls.

How we manage as a society to curb the power of extreme accumulation remains an open question, probably one that we need to improvise on an almost daily basis. Still, there is no basis for believing that a small sliver of very wealthy people are inherently better at establishing policies that govern environmental safety, access to the internet, &c. than are people who work for government at whatever level. I know some incredibly bright, creative, and (yes) entrepreneurial folks who work for government. I also know a few extremely wealthy people who leave me wondering that they still know how to breathe. Vice is versa, also, too.

The greatest tragedy of free market evangelism has been the ongoing erosion of the idea that government can be a vehicle for safeguarding the common-wealth while encouraging an ill-founded faith that private enterprise is inherently more pure and effective. Sure, “everybody” “knows” that government is inept and inefficient, and so on. Post office jokes, &c. But really, are we going to look to the realm of insurance companies, cable tv providers, and peddlers of cubic zirconia to deliver something better?

The big difference is that, to some degree or another, the government staffer or official is *accountable*. It may be difficult, but people get voted out, staffers get fired, lawbreakers are prosecuted. It is in-built into our system of governance that such an outcome is possible. The goal of the Randian Gospel is to exempt a small segment of our society from any such restriction.

Sure, the government is a cauldron of imbecile stew. Five hundred dollar hammers and bridges to nowhere and a fighter plane that nobody wants and it doesn’t work anyway. But private enterprise? West, Texas. Bhopal. Deepwater Horizon.

Comcast!

The gentle reader is now asking, “Fine, Mr Smartass Killjoy McBummer, but what can I do?” Glad you asked.

Resisting the blandishments of the sharing economy’s “benefits” is a good place to start, but not always practical. Find yourself a few drinks over the line and need a ride home? Uber is probably your best bet, and no judgement need follow your decision. The Writer stayed in an Airbnb a few months ago and loved it. And never mind the amount spent on Amazon over the years, especially when we lived in swampy isolation.

Whaddyagonnado?

Well, for one thing, when you have a choice: buy local. If you

have a choice between Starbucks and a local coffee roaster, for instance, use the local. Go to your local independent bookstore if you are lucky enough to have one. Find a local farmer's market for produce, or go to a bar owned by one of your neighbors. (Your average TGI Fridays sucks pond water anyway.) Sure, in reality, there's only so much an individual can do to make a difference; but as more of us commit to making this difference, it starts to add up.<fn>But you can feel like a real schmuck when you buy something local that costs 5, 10, 20 per cent more. Right? News alert: that's the Randian Gospel internalized, the articles of faith that insist that taking every advantage is the only logical path of behavior, that anyone who self-sacrifices is a sucker. Or worse. </fn>

If you are feeling entrepreneurial, ask yourself: What am I bringing to the game that supports making this kind of difference? Are you creating real opportunities for people? Are you offering something that serves to create a healthier commonwealth? To put it another way: Would you be proud to have your momma see what you're doing?

Or maybe, just maybe, you might want to take that entrepreneurial spirit into the public sector. As we used to say back in the old days: Change the system from within.

All other issues aside, we absolutely need to bring about a shift in the general mindset that glorifies the money-maker, the caustic "common sense" that gives permission to disregard suffering and misfortune because it is somehow *deserved*. To somehow, at long last, undermine the Reagan-esque gospel that a person who has a load of money is de facto worthy of respect *just because* the balance sheet says so.

This is not some communistic preaching that everybody needs to make the same amount of money, or that innovation and risk should not be rewarded. But surely we can agree that the personality cults that cluster around the Zuckerbergs and

Cubans and Bezos (and before them the Iacocca's and Welches) are about as justifiable as taking life lessons from the Kardashians, the Duck Dynasty guys, or Honey Boo Boo's family. If we rely upon the denizens of Davos to lead us into the promised land we may find ourselves somewhat surprised that our new world doesn't satisfy our expectations.

But hey, no worries. President Trump will fix everything. He's an entrepreneur, doncha know.

Disruptive Sharing Pt. 2



A few weeks back we took a look at some of the downsides of our new "sharing" economy. It's worth taking a look at some of the really positive aspects of the expanding embrace of entrepreneurial enthusiasm.

I know a number of top-cut people who are entrepreneurs. I mean this with absolute sincerity and conviction; these are people who would bail my ass out of a crack without hesitation, people who give back and pay forward as a matter of character and habit. People with greater social compassion and engagement than I have to offer on my best day, and who do it pretty much without a break.

Some of my friends have or will spend their last dime and ounce of energy trying to turn an idea into something real and tangible. This is the core of entrepreneurship: taking an idea

from the wisps of neuro-chimera and bringing it into the world in a form that can be seen, felt, heard, touched. Even the most committed democratic socialist can recognize the essential value in being able to take an idea from concept to actuality. Entrepreneurship is about getting things done.

And many of these people have created opportunities for other people to expand their own creative expression, to have jobs that offer both economic return and the chance to make a tangible difference through their work. As someone who spent too many years toiling in large organizations – a constant exercise of pouring from the empty into the void – this is a significant contribution to quality of life in our communities.

And it ain't easy. Aside from competing entrepreneurs, you have to face a barrage of people telling you, every step of the way, that "that will *never* work".

Same thing in the "arts" – I know any number of writers, musicians, visual artists, &c. who have figured out a way to create a product that people are willing to pay for. Let's go ahead and say that *product* is a value-neutral term. *A Love Supreme* is a product. So is a Don DeLilo novel. The Bitter Southerner is an entrepreneurial project. Hell, even this bloggy little vineyard is an act of entrepreneurship.<fn>However feeble by the prevailing measure of entrepreneurial success.</fn> Whether the impulse to create these products was mercenary or driven by some other urge is irrelevant. Converting these ideas into something tangible was most definitely entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is not in itself a bad (or even good) thing. It's a value-neutral mindset, just as likely to result in a cure for cancer or erectile disfunction as it is to bring us a more effective high-capacity semi-automatic weapon or herbicidal agent that happens to also cause birth defects in birds and mammals.

But if entrepreneurship *per se* is value-neutral, its practice is often anything but. Where one 'trep brings an innovative idea to bear on a long-standing need or problem, too many others use their ingenuity to deliver "disruptions" that are at best merely useless and wasteful; at their worst, too many bright ideas are downright predatory and damaging. (More on this in Part 3.)

It's a current hot fad to tout entrepreneurship as the silver bullet that will save us from everything that ails us. This is where the whole enterprise opens itself up to the schools of remora who are always ready to swarm the hottest new trend. Worse, the presentation of the "principles" of entrepreneurship are often taught under the guise of value-neutrality despite their inherently value-rich underpinnings.

In Part 1, I linked to an article in *Jacobin* magazine, "The Entrepreneurship Racket", a hard look at higher education's headlong rush into the cult and fad of the entrepreneur. The driving force behind this new branch of academia is a direct outgrowth of decades of free-market propaganda that really took flight under the greed-is-good ethos of the Reagan raj.<fn>Remember…Reagan ruined *everything*.</fn> Under the rubrics of this approach to entrepreneurship, the only thing that matters is the amount of money an idea generates. The insidious aspect of this measurement is that it pretends to value neutrality, while other concerns (e.g., worker dislocation/exploitation, distortions of real estate values and availability, environmental or health issues, &c.) will be disregarded as squishy moral issues, consideration of same being a clear violation of so-called value neutrality. In this paradigm, areas of study that do not generate Return on Investment or produce alumni with abundant incomes that can be tapped for future donations are threatened with extinction under the value-neutral rubrics that are coming to define entrepreneurial higher-ed governance. Anthropology? Classical studies? Worse than useless.

The propaganda program behind the burgeoning entrepreneur fad continues a decades-long campaign against organized labor and any regulation that can be viewed as an imposition against those who would lead us unto the glorious free-market promised land. If you think this is hyperbolic, then you've never read the curricular materials disseminated by pro-business groups like American for Prosperity and the like.

To evangelists of free-market doctrine, it is a matter of fundamental faith that our salvation lies in some sort of Randian utopia in which success and happiness depends solely upon the "value neutral" measure of RoI. The extent to which this has become accepted as "common sense"<fn>A phrase that generally predicts an impending bullshit shower.</fn> is indicative of the success of a long-term program of indoctrination disguised as education.

The prevailing Gospel of Entrepreneurship is about getting things done that make money.<fn>Notwithstanding the sub-field of Social Entrepreneurship, which urges innovation that provides benefit to a vaguely defined common good. Not that this is bad; neither is it as purely good as its champions might suggest. More in Part 3.</fn> We've all but abandoned the critical thinking that lies behind the notion of 'just because you can, doesn't mean you should' and replaced it with 'if it makes money, just do it'. The boiler room in *Glengarry Glen Ross* is pretty much the naked id of value neutral entrepreneurship.

This is not a blanket indictment of the 'trep spirit. I know too many good people who approach their business activities with sensitivity to environmental and cultural impacts, people who honestly treat their entrepreneurship as central to their commitment to responsible citizenship. Really good folks who are as unlike this smirking shitstain as water is from fire.



Possibly the most punchable face in America.

If you get right down to it, the only thing Martin Shkreli did wrong was to rub everyone's nose in his steaming pile of "success". His predatory disruptions were right in line with the free-market Gospel of St. Ronald. He's the poster boy for free-market entrepreneurship. He just forgot to use his indoor voice.

If hair metal is the result of too many people not realizing that *Spinal Tap* was a joke, the flood of Shkrelis in our midst may be a result of people not recognizing that Gordon Gekko was a villain, not a role model. Given the overwhelming success of free-market evangelism, this outcome should come as no surprise.

That Uber/Lyft or WalMart or Airbnb or Amazon offer products and services that "we" have enthusiastically embraced does not excuse the very real damage that each of these companies have imposed in the course of their disruptive triumph. There was a

sign hanging in a guitar repair shop I used to visit that said, “Fast. Good. Cheap. Pick two.” As a society, we have chosen. Cheaper, faster…we love that shit. It’s long since past time to take a look at the ‘good’ we are sacrificing.