



A TIME TO PROMOTE THE COMMON WELFARE

When my daughter Holly was a teenager we went together to see a production of Shakespeare's KING LEAR. Holly was quite taken with a line Kent uttered about Lear, "*What wouldst thou do, old man?*" She would say this frequently to me as we moved through the universal minefields of adolescence. I haven't heard that phrase from her in many years so I must be improving, even though I am now older than Lear!

I have thought a lot about King Lear lately. "*When majesty stoops to folly*" often comes to mind. And reading about how people in the government are frequently warned not to speak truth to power, I am reminded of Lear's line, "*Come not between the dragon and his wrath.*" Perhaps that's a bit insulting to literary dragons and their many followers, but you know what I mean.



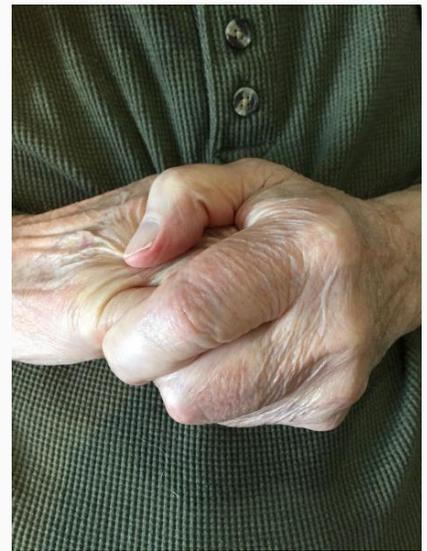
In this country we are traveling a very bumpy road. We can spend our time rending our garments as greed and folly are substituted for the common good. But we must be careful, for the future is in our hands. It may take a long time for this cycle to change. Some

of us may not see it, but it will change. Once again to the play — "*This cold night will turn*

us all to fools and maugers. Let us make sure that does not happen! Shakespeare ends King Lear with this advice, “*Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most: we that are young shall never see so much nor live so long.*”



Now let us jump from Shakespeare to Gallup. The annual Gallup Global Emotions Report has just come out. The headline in the NEW YORK TIMES was “*Americans Are Among The Most Stressed People In The World.*” The Gallup poll showed that Americans feeling stress, anger, and worry was at the highest level in a decade. The United States landed almost at a par with Greece which has had the world's greatest stress levels since 2012. The poll reflects that 59% of the Greek population are experiencing stress, and 55% of the United States population. Like any poll, this one is subject to a lot of interpretation. I think, however, it paints a pretty accurate picture.



Is it really helpful to ask why we are among the most stressed people in the world? Everyone could have a list of reasons. The political and economic chaos would find a place on most lists. But it seems to me that there is a great increase in what people

used to call “kitchen table troubles.” Those are very basic things that impact all of us, unless you happen to be among the top 1% of the wealthy. Food, housing, medical care, education, and similar issues are becoming problematic for more and more people. Is the



fact that we are so divided the root of what seems like a decreasing concern for the common good? Has individual greed and special interests replaced the Constitution’s mandate to “*promote the general Welfare*”? Is there no longer a sense of ethical leadership in the highest realm of government? This probably contributes to the stressful environment. However, one of my oldest friends who has been in local government for most of her adult life, points

out that when you get down to the level of school boards, city councils, and county

supervisors, the values we miss in Washington, DC are often very much alive. When we see each other as neighbors, we often act like neighbors. And among neighbors, compassion, honesty and decency are more likely to play a role in the decision-making process.

Lately many people are talking and writing about values, and lamenting the dishonesty and crudity that are increasingly present in our national dialogue. Unfortunately, this situation can have tragic consequences in everyday life. Just a few days ago a 19-year-old domestic terrorist in Southern California, who had already set fire to a mosque, managed to commit murder and terrorize the community gathered at a synagogue for the end of Passover. Acting out of hate may be on the verge of becoming the new normal. We very senior citizens have seen such actions legitimized once before with the fascists. It is a very dangerous situation.



Pulitzer prize-winning columnist Bret Stephens used the recent death of Charles Van Doren (1926–2019) to write about what Stephens termed *The Annihilation of Shame*. Van Doren had been the star of a very popular TV quiz program back in the 1950s. Eventually it was revealed that the show was rigged and the contestants coached. This had been done in order to create a sense of drama and high ratings. When the truth came out, Americans were scandalized. Van Doren's life was ruined. He was truly ashamed.

Stephens suggests that had this episode come out today, there would be no big scandal or shame. He observes that, "The lines between fame and infamy have been blurred." In the past the method of avoiding shame was behaving well. But in the age in which we are living, the method ". . . for avoiding shame is not giving a damn. Spurious bone-spu draft deferment? Shrug. Fraudulent business and charitable practices? Snigger. Outrageous



personal invective? Sneer. Inhuman treatment of children at the border? Snarl. Hush-money payoffs to porn-star and centerfold mistresses? Stud!

Is Stephens too harsh? That is for each of us to decide. However, he lays some of the

responsibility at each of our doors since the annihilation of shame requires public acquiescence. In Van Doren's case there were *"tidal waves of dismay and disdain."* Where are those tidal waves today? That is the responsibility of each person. We each contribute to the annihilation of shame. But we do not have to *"succumb to this culture."* Perhaps we would feel less stressed if we did not succumb!



Let us hop from that stressful landscape to Starcross where I live. It was very foggy this morning. That was a bit disappointing as we have had delightfully sunny days and I hoped that we were well into Spring. But as I was writing, the fog slowly began to lift and now I feel the sun.

The times in which we are living are often foggy but I truly believe the fog will lift. Perhaps we can take a final loop back to Shakespeare and let our spirits be lightened with Titania's final words in A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM,

*Hand-in-hand, with fairy grace,
Will we sing, and bless this place.*

Brother Toby