

Long is the way back to the homeland,
Far, so far,
There near the stars above the rim of the woods,
Old times laugh . . .

Hans Scholl (1918-1943)



IT WOULD BE NICE TO BE A TROUT ...

I didn't realize why I wrote this reflection until I had finished. It had to do with hearing about some young people thinking about dropping their American citizenship and moving to various places like Canada or New Zealand. I don't want to lose them. I want them to vote and fight. What is pushing them isn't simply about the present occupant of the White House, who the Dalai Lama (1935-) recently called a person "lacking in moral principle". What discourages them most has to do with the crude base of White Nationalists which Trump has revitalized and perhaps shows its most vulgar aspects on our southern border, not only to migrants but also to lawmakers. As to the unusual title to this reflection that will eventually become clear. Onward ...



Good afternoon America — or at least this small slice of it!

It is politics-time in the USA and some remarkably unpleasant things are going on. A few days ago the distinguished columnist Michelle Goldberg wrote that Donald Trump was “transforming American politics into a kleptocratic fascist reality show and turning our once-great country into a global laughingstock ...” — Don't worry I also had to look up “kleptocratic.”

On the same day a group of Congressional Representatives visited a facility for migrants in Texas. They were particularly shocked and dismayed by what the women



migrants described as their treatment; held in rooms without running water, in sleeping bags on concrete floors, children separated from families, denied access to medications, etc. Representative Joseph P. Kennedy III, said, “*It feels like a jail and they’re treating them like they’re in jail. They deserve better than this, and our country deserves better than this.*”

When Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (aka “AOC”) was sharing her observations with the group of concerned citizens that had gathered, a small group of vulgar red-hatted Trump supporters, attempting to Make America Great Again, began to heckle her. There is always a predictable outcome when picking an argument with AOC. The hecklers dwindled away.

That same day *ProPublica* reported the existence of a secret group of current and former Border Patrol agents and revealed a covert social media account for the group where they posted jokes about migrant deaths including the recent tragic drowning of the father and daughter escaping violence and poverty in El Salvador. There were also doctored, racist and obscene images about the nation’s lawmakers. Apparently some of the most offensive posts, including manufactured disgusting sexual scenes, were directed at AOC. Officials of “our” Customs and Border Protection agency said they would open an investigation. Mr. Trump’s take on the situation was, “I know that the Border Patrol is not happy with the Democrats in Congress.”

So here we are in the land of the free and the home of the brave!



A friend of many years recently lamented that with all the frightening people emerging, we lose track of all the good people who are also coming to the fore. She was rightly talking about people who history will identify as significant figures. However being a devout follower of Albert Camus (1913–1960) I want to speak up for the many people who may not ever be remembered in history. Camus felt that in troubling times we must look for solutions “*in the very thick of the battle*” and then,

If we listen carefully we may hear amid the noise of empires and nations, a soft sound of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some say that this hope lies in a nation; others in a person. I believe instead that is awakened, revitalized, nourished by the hands of individuals whose actions and works every day negate the crudest implications of history. As a result there shines forth fleetingly the ever threatened truth that each and every person on the foundation of her or his own sufferings and joys builds for all.



And I believe that we are in one of those fleeting and very significant moments. What can each of us do? There is one obvious task.



It seems to me sometimes that a number of citizens of the United States consider voting an unreasonable chore. Other folks are simply so discouraged about the great level of corruption and manipulation, they feel their vote doesn't matter anymore.



We average about 60% voter turnout in presidential elections years and about 40% in midterm years. Compare that to Scandinavian countries where voting is in the mid-80% range. Yet those of us who did not have right to vote fought bravely for it. Just to hit the high points: in 1870 the XV Amendment to the Constitution said the right to vote could not be denied to anyone on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. (We had to fight a bloody Civil War for that and even so the era of Jim Crow Laws took that right away until fairly recent times). In 1920 the XIX Amendment extended voting rights to women (many of whom suffered incredible treatment to bring that about). In 1964 the XXIV Amendment provided that a person could not be denied the right to vote because of the inability to pay a "poll tax". In 1971 the XXVI Amendment dropped the voting age from 21 to 18.

I had to be 21 before casting my first presidential vote in 1952. I voted for Adlai Stevenson.

He lost. Dwight D. Eisenhower won. Nonetheless I felt good about having cast a vote. It was a troubling time. We were in the middle of the Cold War (1947–1991), the second Red Scare – McCarthyism (1947–1957), and the Korean War (1950–1953). In April 1952 we tested a nuclear bomb. General Douglas MacArthur was stopped in his desire to use that bomb in Korea. There were 58,000 cases of polio that year. I entered law school and was convinced I could help save the world! That didn't work out as planned, but generally I was pushing in the right direction.

Why do I put you through all this ancient history? Because I want to emphasize that things do change. Sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Determining the direction of history has a lot to do with the actions, including voting, of ordinary citizens like you and like me.

Political campaigns can be truly disgusting and dishonest. And they seem to be getting longer and longer. Some elected officials just run a perpetual campaign. I think we have to look at it as we do with gardening. There are times when you have to handle the manure to help the vegetables grow.



Vote — it is important.



“Fascism” is being used more frequently these days by journalists and lawmakers. Is this the correct term? You'd have to ask a political scientist or cultural philosopher.



However, even though we may be moving in that direction it doesn't seem to me that we are there yet. And occasionally for all of us there opens an opportunity to do something more than vote.

If we look back on a clear era of fascism, it's easy to find many ordinary people doing extraordinary things to combat the seemingly overpowering Nazi regime. I've long been fascinated by the short life of Sophie Scholl. She was born in 1921 and died on February 22, 1943 at the age of 21.

Sophie was idealistic. As a young child she had joined the Hitler Youth. However she and her older brother Hans, even in their adolescence, saw the evil that had descended on Germany. The last straw was when they found out about the “final solution” for the elimination of Jewish people. Hans was a medical student and conscripted to go into the Army. Sophie was a student at the university in Munich. With a few friends, calling themselves “the White Rose,” they secretly drafted and printed a leaflet against the Nazi plans. It was well distributed. Sophie even threw some of them from a balcony into the atrium of the main university building. Where they landed there is now a stone monument depicting the leaflets,



which called on people as members of civilization, *“to defend themselves as best they can at this late hour... To work against miscarriages of humankind against fascism and any similar system of totalitarianism. Offer resistance.”*



Hans and Sophie, together with their friends in the White Rose, were not primarily motivated by political beliefs but strong convictions coming from personal spiritual searching. Members of the White Rose did have strong moral principles. This led them to sacrifice their lives for what they believed in. Hans and Sophie were eventually captured and executed on the same day as their “trial” — by beheading.

A short time ago the letters between Hans and Sophie were published in English. As one reviewer put it, *“there appear in their writings spontaneous outbursts of joy and gratitude for the gifts of nature, music, poetry, and art. In the midst of evil and degradation, theirs is a celebration of the spiritual and the humane.”*



The point I want to make is that Sophie Scholl was not a super heroine but an ordinary college student who enjoyed the little things in life. She was, for instance, irritated by the fact that her kitten would play with her pen as she was trying to write, thereby making it necessary for her to explain various ink blotches.

I want to end by sharing with you something Sophie wrote on February 17, 1943. She had been listening on the phonograph to a light and fast movement of Franz Schubert's Trout Quintet.

It makes me want to be a trout myself. You can't help rejoicing and laughing, however moved or sad at heart you feel, when you see the springtime clouds in the sky and the budding branches sway, stirred by the wind, in the bright young sunlight. I am so much looking forward to the spring again. In Schubert's music you can positively feel and smell the breezes and scents and hear the birds and the whole of creation cry out for joy.... [It is] like cool, clear, sparkling water — oh, it's sheer enchantment!



On the next day, February 18, Hans and Sophie were arrested by the Gestapo. On February 22 they were “tried” and executed three hours later.

Hans and Sophie would probably be surprised to learn that 15 schools in Germany have been named after them.



Stay, vote, fight — please!

Brother Toby