

A MEDITATION: WHO ARE YOU?

[NB: Byline check, thanks./~Rayne]

I've had this tune stuck in my head for days now while pondering existential crises in the U.K. and the U.S. as well as the full-blast firehose of news this week. Though a British band, The Who asked the right question giving me pause.

The capper in the course of my meditations – of all bloody things – was this fragment from a speech given late last November by that well-known survivor Rod Rosenstein:

... I visited the nation of Armenia in 1994, just as it was emerging from seven decades of Soviet domination. I gave a talk about public corruption at the University of Yerevan. After I finished, a student raised his hand. He asked me, "If you cannot pay bribes in America, how do you get electricity?"

It was a pragmatic question that illustrated how that young man had learned to think about his society. Corruption may start small, but it tends to spread like an infection. It stifles innovation, fuels inefficiency, and inculcates distrust of government.

We aim to prevent corruption. ...

Both this snippet and The Who's tune brought to mind another couple memorable exchanges I've had in the past with co-workers from abroad. One chap I'll call PDV lived in the Netherlands and loved to visit the U.S., coming over at least once a year to marvel at the profusion of choices we had.

It was early 2000, well before the election, and I remember PDV telling me that one thing he really enjoyed about the U.S. was our freedom. I

laughed because I thought he meant the myriad beers he giddily described being offered in one of our chain restaurants, or the ridiculous number of choices in dried pasta in an American grocery store, both of which he had remarked upon in our previous chats.

“No,” he told me. “Your society is free. When you go to the airport there are no dogs, no military personnel except travelers, no police armed to the teeth like military.”

And now we take our goddamned shoes off, allow our bodies to be scanned, tolerate the armed personnel with dogs as if we were sheep being herded.

The other co-worker from overseas I didn't know as well. We communicated less frequently, I think in part because he felt less connected to the rest of the global business. It made sense; he was in South Africa, nearly half the globe away from my location. I tried to make him feel comfortable during his visit to the U.S. – this was in 2000 – but the smallish company town in which my facility was located wasn't yet up to world standards.

Not a place one could easily find rusks for breakfast let alone crumpets.

What struck him as odd when he visited was our openness. Not just the manner in which we greet each other, especially here in flyover country where our passive-aggressiveness is well hidden beneath our Midwest niceness.

When I asked him to explain what he meant he said, “You leave everything out.” We didn't take in our outdoor patio furniture or our grills. We didn't lock up our personal effects. He said it wasn't like that where he lived in Johannesburg at the time; if anything was left outside, it disappeared.

I didn't have anything to say to that. I couldn't imagine living in such a suffocating fashion.

And yet now years later I have to monitor everything I do with my electronic devices, hide my traffic with various tools, avoid cameras and Blueray and other IoT devices to prevent losing personal information. No one's stolen my bike from my porch or my gas grill from my deck but somebody knows my age, name, location and they've sold it repeatedly without my express permission.

Who are you? the song asks. Somebody knows, and it's worth a fortune to them; they've stolen that information.

~ ~ ~

It wasn't The Who that entrenched the question into my brain pan. It was the other way around, a moral and ethical question which wouldn't leave me alone as I watched miserable wretch after miserable wretch compromise themselves this past week.

The question may even have started to embed itself when I revisited Marcus Aurelius' Meditations this last month and asked, What is Rudy Giuliani?

He's not 'America's Mayor' – unless America has become a bat shit insane and lawless place.

He was there at the scene in 2001 when our collective consciousness was hacked and we began to destroy our open society with a police state.

Is this who we are, weak-willed and servile, giving up our freedoms for the illusion of safety and security, failing to question to whom we yield these freedoms?

Because Rudy Giuliani is among the last people we should seek as an authority on security. He is wholly corrupt, the very thing we should be avoiding if we are a free and open society. He conducts his business in the dark, without oversight, which is appealing to a certain kind of client, abusing the faith and trust some have awarded him by simply surviving the demands 9/11/2001 placed on him as a mayor.

In retrospect perhaps he survived not because he was good but because he was so very bad. We have to ask ourselves what didn't survive but should have had better leaders with integrity lead us through that time.

Did we really survive?

~ ~ ~

2000 and 2010 did serious damage to us; our country arrived at a fork in the road and it took the turn for the worse. Imagine if instead we had refused to accept the SCOTUS appointment of George Bush in 2000 as president. Imagine if our nascent government surplus had become a means for providing health care for all. Imagine if President Al Gore had been able to promulgate his intended policies to halt climate change.

2010 exacerbated the damage begun in 2000 with the aggressive gerrymandering of states so that the public's true desires were suppressed at the polls in subsequent elections. We have become a nation in thrall to an oppressive minority, one which is willingly corrupted in order to retain its power over what was the largest economy in the world. Gains made for personal freedom have been few and squelched whenever possible.

We are not the government now in place; they do not truly represent America. They are what a rigged system created by corruption permits us.

What is left of us?

~ ~ ~

Which brings me to that question beating a tattoo in my head: Who are you?

By you I mean the person in the mirror. I mean the persons reading this post, which is in itself another mirror. I mean us, the plural you, the collective we, us.

Who are we?

We aim to prevent corruption, said Rosenstein, and yet I have no faith in this statement from him. I can't see what he has done to *prevent*

what is happening around us now, a steadily increasing occupation by a transnational organized crime syndicate masquerading as a political party, in league with other crime syndicates abroad which are proxies for hostile nations.

I can't see how his boss Bill Barr is doing anything to *prevent* corruption, especially when he perverts and corrupts the First Amendment by claiming from a podium that secularism causes increasing drug use after meeting with the head of a pro-Republican media organization. Not to mention his own role in obstructing justice with his gross misrepresentation of the Special Counsel's report and his lies to the Senate before that during his confirmation hearing.

I don't see how our law enforcement is stopping a slide toward a wholly transactional society, when Trump can admit to soliciting foreign aid for his personal benefit on camera with an implied return and our top law enforcement and Senate leadership do nothing but blink like deer in the headlights, offering mealy-mouthed platitudes instead of adherence to ethics and faithful application of the law.

The easier question may be who are we not. I hope we are not these corrupt functionaries holding the places meant for persons with real ethics.

We aim to prevent corruption, Rosenstein said. Note how he didn't say we stop corruption.

If you read the rest of his speech you'll note he focused on disproportionate and inefficient enforcement, working on consistency to avoid "piling on" in relation to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.

And yet here we are, nearly a year later, digging through a mound of corruption, staring at multiple acts of bribery or extortion as well as violations of federal election laws.

Does this look like we've aimed to prevent corruption? Had it not been for a determined and

concerned whistleblower we might never have realized there was the possibility of rampant corruption here and overseas involving the White House.

Is this who we are, a nation whittled away down to one brave person who felt their personal ethics required more of them than to simply allow this to continue unchecked?

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My social media timeline is filled with people who are upset about Trump's agreement with Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. We do not know the terms of the agreement, only that Trump has consented to Turkey's incursion into northern Syria to attack the Kurds. There is no apparent benefit to the U.S. and definitely no benefit to the Kurds obtained – The Art of the Deal at work once again.

We can't rule out there was another quid pro quo involved in this agreement because Trump has properties and businesses inside Turkey, having failed to divest them to avoid conflicts of interest.

ISIS members have escaped because their Kurdish captors have been attacked.

There are atrocities recorded – non-combatants including multiple children killed, a human right activist murdered. Our own troops have been pinned down under Turkish attacks, ordered to stand down and not fire back nor protect the Kurds who have been our allies.

We are both collateral damage and party to war crimes. We have been led into this by a man who is corruptly compromised.

Is this who we chose to be?

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Every day is a chance to make a new choice, to pick a different way forward. Most of us believe we choose every day not to be a society like the one Rosenstein alluded to in his speech, a place

where corruption has infected our thinking and we accept it as a way of life.

(Though I refer to him I'm not at all convinced Rosenstein is above a banal form of corruption by complacency. Someone should ask him if merely surviving is enough, if that's all he wants for an epitaph on his tombstone: *He was a survivor – until now.*)

I can't imagine having to arrange to bribe someone to order a service or product, but we do already accept applications on our phones which direct us to goods or services based on payments those providers made to the application developer. When is this a service versus a system of bribery and extortion?

I can't imagine bribing a school to obtain an education for myself or my children, and yet some people have and do though only a few have been caught out and punished for it, and nominally at that. When does it become commonplace for bribes to be paid in education, or to punish the well-meaning ineligible voter far more harshly than those who engage in bribes?

I couldn't imagine compromising on the ideal of one citizen, one vote. Yet I know I didn't get engaged to deter this ideal's collapse until too late in my own state. It was like a slow-motion train wreck watching a GOP majority legislator elected to office only to trash the idea of a representative republic right here, up close and personal. It's not as if they were brilliant; I participated in a debate with our local GOP state representative who proved he was as dumb as a box of rocks. But corruption isn't smart – it's persistent, determined, ruthless, and often has the money their ethical opponents don't. Smart didn't overcome this, expecting everyone to play by the Marquess of Queensbury's rules in a bloody street brawl.

I should know better now, having become an activist while watching our slide toward fascism after 9/11; engaged in tracking the tech

industry only to find it riddled with misogynist and hebephilic scum. And yet a lack of imagination kept me from seeing the big picture.

I couldn't imagine living in a country where our leaders openly talk about their own corrupt practices on television, ask for foreign interference in our democracy for personal benefit, and the people don't take to the streets like they did in South Korea or Romania.

Yet here we are – me, typing away at my keyboard, you reading these pixels. Neither of us in the streets as they are in Hong Kong, fighting to preserve what's left of their democracy.

Who are we?

Who are you?