

A “Breaking Bad” Culture Got Its President



IT IS THE custom in America that, after a calamity happens—whether political, social, mechanical, or act of nature—we turn immediately to investigating how and why it happened. We do so because we presume that understanding the how and why will enable us to build toward a New Day. Americans are pragmatic that way, or at least we are when at our best.

To explain the how and why of Donald Trump’s ascendancy as president—a seismic calamity to liberals, a surprise gift to Trumpsters—the commentariat in these ten months has produced libraries of political analysis, tracing over the last half-century an increasingly angry Republican politics, fanned by flame-throwers like Barry Goldwater and Newt Gingrich, with an assist directed at government by Ronald Reagan—anger that the huckster Trump exploited to blow up the party and take the White House.

But Trump cannot be understood only as a political phenomenon. Donald J. Trump is also a *cultural* phenomenon, a product—the exemplar—of an increasingly amoral popular culture that, over this half-century, developed parallel to our angry politics. For liberals still in a daze over Trump’s election, it is useful to consider this cultural context. After all, we *choose* our political party, but we *live* immersed in a culture.

Perhaps the cultural signpost best reflecting the loss of our moral compass was the wildly popular and critically acclaimed TV series of recent years, "Breaking Bad," its break with moral norms made tauntingly explicit in its title. Actually the break with norms occurred decades earlier, with this series' story-line taking the trend to a new low: A high-school chemistry teacher, told he has terminal cancer, aims to provide for his family "after" by using his scientific know-how and becoming a producer of high-grade meth.

Lauding such degradation of character and capitalism, reflected in both "Breaking Bad" and Donald Trump, would be unthinkable to preceding generations, notably the Greatest Generation, the one that endured the Great Depression largely without a social safety net, then fought, suffered, and won World War II, securing liberty for us, their children. But such degradation *is* thinkable today: A critical mass of the electorate, hearing the cultural O.K. to "break bad," last November pulled the lever for a spectacularly amoral man, a predatory capitalist of basest character.

How could we fall so low? First, the dam broke—or rather, was broken—then came the flood. First to be sundered was the moral code, the sense of right and wrong developed over centuries of civic practice, democratic evolution, philosophy, religion. Then, after moral "deregulation," came the flood—sexual and marital norms breaking down; profanity overpowering wit and even common sense; pornography brought in from the fringe (remember the fringe?) and poured into the mainstream, to a point where today any muchness of a muchness is called "porn" (e.g., "real estate porn"?). Most damningly, children are now exposed to, and hurt by, what once upon a time was restricted to the adult sphere; meanwhile, many adults have become children pursuing their dishonorable heart's desire, which is easier now because we got rid of honor, too.

How was the moral code sundered? If you grew up in the post-World War II years, from the 1950s on, you noticed that in almost every grouping—the playground, the dorm, the work world, in society—when it came to a discussion of what should be done in that moment or, more

elementally, what should be, there was always a voice in the group calling down the “should” and taunting the group’s acting moral arbiter as “party-pooper” (the term “party” reflecting a general lack of seriousness). In this way, voiced incessantly and derisively, a stigma was born for my generation, the boomers. Boomers grew allergic to making any moral discrimination whatsoever, for dire fear of being called “judgmental.” “Sow the wild oats and hope for crop failure” served as our moral code. Tragically, we passed this pattern on to our children.

And, tragically, in this way—by mishandling and abusing the liberty secured for us by the Greatest Generation—America lost its moral compass.

(To be sure, the Greatest Generation had its faults—notably racism, sexism, anti-Semitism—which a cohort of the boomers, myself included, sought to correct early on by allying with our African-American friends in the civil rights movement. Real milestones in debarring race and sex discrimination were achieved in employment and education. But a reaction to all this “political correctness” has set in—another fault-line Trump exploits.)

Mirroring the public’s loss of moral compass, our cultural fare—films, TV, books, theater—makes it a point to “push the envelope” of whatever’s left of propriety and taste, setting up a dynamic whereby artists up the ante or get sidelined. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), whose title characters gleefully announce “We rob banks,” set the violent and nihilistic tone for succeeding filmmakers. The sexual explicitness of *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) did likewise for succeeding novelists. In TV, “Breaking Bad” was begot by “The Sopranos,” the hit series whose lead character “whacked” his rivals dead. In theater, serious examination of moral subjects got whacked by *The Vagina Monologues*. Critics, nominal gatekeepers, got hip to such “transgressive” artists and praised their “bent” and “twisted” product; weirdly, these artists earned prestige for their “courage” to push at a *wide-open* door. No wonder then, that with so much envelope-pushing over decades, there’s not much envelope left anymore.

No wonder, also, that all this envelope-pushing and trashing of things moral triggered *major* pushback—from the conservative right. Conservatives in the postwar era, from Goldwater to Nixon to Reagan to the Bushes, have made political hay by pointing to the worst of liberal licentiousness and winning power. Some liberals naively think an “anything-goes” mentality is just a free-speech issue, with no moral consequence, but generations of conservatives have dominated public life in big part by claiming to be America’s moral protectors. This claim allows for much hypocrisy, of course, the most egregious current example being evangelical Christians finding the amoral Trump morally acceptable and becoming his most ardent supporters.

In his recent essay “How America Lost Its Mind,” Kurt Andersen in *The Atlantic* traces a related loss, also beginning in the ‘60s, “the beginning of the end of reason”: the increasing relativism of truth and fact, when America became “untethered from reality,” when the mantra became “Do your own thing, find your own reality, it’s all relative.” Again, conservatives benefited, by claiming to be Truth’s defenders, while also railing against relativism’s undercutting of “venerable and comfortable ideas—certain notions of entitlement (according to race and gender) and aesthetic beauty and metaphysical and moral clarity.” Meanwhile, Andersen writes, “anything-goes relativism” enabled the far right to become more unhinged than the left, producing “gun-rights hysteria, black-helicopter conspiracism, climate-change denial, and more.” And the big beneficiary of this “fantasy-industrial complex”? The faker Donald Trump.

As described here, the onus for our present dark and unhappy moment, this dramatic falling-off since the Greatest Generation, would seem to lie with liberals. And if we are truthful, we deserve much blame: Liberals disposed of the moral compass and Truth, conservatives reacted to save those invaluable things. Liberals acted—irresponsibly—and conservatives reacted, not always responsibly, but with the advantage of acting in defense.

What is to be done? How do we achieve a New Day and save America? Can we?

In a way, course-correction is already underway—seen in our grief at the damage America has wrought upon itself, in our nausea with the hair-raising daily reality of this wrecking crew of an administration, in our profound and heartfelt yearning for a return to decency and normalcy, out from under the shadow of the hideous Trump. We are flailing badly, groping in the dark. May I submit that, out of deep and profound need and not mere want, what we are groping for is . . . our moral compass, which we misplaced decades ago. To return to decency and normalcy, we need that compass.

It means “anything-goes” liberalism can’t go anymore. Like comedian Kathy Griffin holding up a mock severed head of Trump, a prank which drew universal condemnation, not only from conservatives but from other liberals. That pushback was moral discrimination working, dimly perceived. Liberals have a problem with limits, but responsible liberalism requires consideration of consequences.

Recovering decency and normalcy also means (pardon the forthcoming explicitness) “breaking good.” It means getting over the knee-jerk habit of mocking virtue, honor, truthfulness, purpose, dignity. It means redefining humanity upward, from pathology and dysfunction, back to the realm of goodness and nobility. We *need* to do this, pragmatically speaking, if we are to save ourselves from the moral calamity of Donald Trump. Great nations decline because of moral decay. The only way we will arrest our present decline and prevent its becoming permanent is by recovering our moral compass.

We can do this. In fact, in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the deadly confrontation just days ago between the neo-Nazi/alt-right and a brave group of counter-protesters, we may at last have found our moral compass. The powerful pushback from the public and corporate America against Trump’s equivalence of the alt-right with the alt-left, a small militant group he’s contemptibly conflating with the counter-protesters, is the only heartening thing in this tragic event: The American people are taking a moral stand, declaring such equivalence is wrong. Only a president breaking spectacularly bad could ever countenance the Nazi

swastika on our shores. Doing so, Trump has forever abdicated any moral authority—the ultimate authority he can never wield.

It may be that Donald Trump's sole utility as president will be forcing Americans to come to our moral senses. Lord knows, regarding the rightness and wrongness of things, he presents us with what Zorba the Greek called "the full catastrophe." In typical American fashion, we will get there circuitously: after sowing the wild oats, hoping for redemption. But this time we must replace hope with effort. We must—and we can—deliver our own redemption.

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