

# CONCERNING THE UNDERLYING DISEASE

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## **Thought Experiment No. 1**

Imagine a baseball stadium. Fill it with twenty thousand Americans. Require Democrats to wear blue and Republicans red. At a podium at second base, have a person make a speech about, say, immigration.

Soon enough, fights break out.

Rewind.

Same twenty thousand people. Let them dress however they like. Instead of the speechmaking guy, put two baseball teams out there. Instantly, it's a different energy. Among the fans for Team One will be both liberals and conservatives, suddenly united in common cause. Ditto Team Two. There will be disagreements, sure, but because we've been taught about acceptable baseball-game discourse, these will tend to be relatively good-natured.

## **Questions for Discussion:**

Regarding the first example:

Who put out the order to wear red or blue?

Who dragged that podium out there?

Who selected the topic? And from what list?

Is it possible that "politics" has come to mean arguing percussively about a short list of pre-approved topics (immigration, abortion, cancel culture, etc.), these topics having been provided, somehow, by (let's say) certain distant powers, who have also provided a rigid framework within which to discuss them, a framework designed not to solve anything but to insure perpetual disagreement, with agitation as the goal, agitation being, let's face it, a big money-maker?

## **Thought Experiment No. 2**

Seat four Democrats and four Republicans around a charming local conference table somewhere in the heart of the heart of the country. (Put one of those golden American maples out the window, and every now and then have an autumn leaf fall off it.) They are a town council. Their topic is potholes.

There are five thousand dollars' worth of potholes in town, but the council has only three thousand in the pothole-repair budget.

Those eight people are trying to solve a specific problem. Which potholes can be left unfilled? Well, which are the biggest? Shouldn't we take care of that one in front of the hospital?

These three potholes, on that road on the outskirts of town, where nobody ever goes, are going to have to wait.

The discussion is not theoretical but practical. (What is the leftist opinion on potholes, anyway, or the MAGA view?) This is *problem-solving*, something we Americans are good at (or at least think we are). Most people, of either party, know a pragmatic solution when they see one, especially if they've been working on the problem and have some idea of the costs, choices, and sacrifices required to solve it.

What may result among this group of people is something like fondness.

We, the Pothole Eight, will have come through the wars together. We'll enjoy scoffing together regarding the laughable critiques of our work coming in from the ill-informed populace. Maybe we'll feel a little proud of what we've accomplished. Sometimes, when driving, I'll spot a big new pothole and I'll call Murray, my friend from the council, who may be a Republican, but, honestly, I don't care. I just want to tell him about that big honker pothole.

#### **Questions for Discussion:**

What, or who, is making us dislike one another so much?

Might it be that one reason we're feeling sick right now is that our natural desire to be fond of one another is being thwarted by distant, profit-based forces?

#### **Thought Experiment No. 3**

Imagine you are about to have a political argument with a close friend or family member. You are on opposing sides of the left-right rift. You have had this discussion many times before.

Many times.

#### **Questions for Discussion:**

Doesn't it sometimes feel that it would be simpler if you each just brought over a small TV and left it running in the kitchen, tuned to your respective network, while the two of you went into the yard and talked about something about which you possess some original knowledge? Once you're out there, talking like that, won't it be nice to feel your pre-formed "political" carapaces drop away? And won't it be discouraging and alarming when, as soon as one of you slips up and utters a triggering word or phrase ("immigrant" or "Trump" or "politically correct" or "eating cats and dogs," for example), you veer back into your canned "political" jargon, like actors suddenly aware that the scripts you've been given must, at all costs, be honored?

In that moment, as the two of you stand there like Rock 'Em Sock 'Em robots, beating up on each other with someone else's phrases, looking, often, a little sad, even ashamed, who is speaking through you?

#### **Thought Experiment No. 4**

Imagine a simple, pastoral predecessor of ours, walking around, club in hand, smelling the flowers.

That cave person's ability to construct opinions on the basis of mental projection is what allows

him to survive. This is true for us, too.

But we're getting a lot more information than he was, information of a peculiar sort, information that is powerful, and has been constructed far away, by people with agendas. It's being delivered invisibly, in a way that gives us a deep sense of belonging. It's addictive. It's overwhelming. It comes pouring unmediated into the brain, essentially the same brain that Mr. Flower Sniffer walked around with, and, like a stomach designed for nuts and fruit suddenly faced with a TripleFlame Macaroni & Lard Burger, that brain starts having, well, digestive issues, but gives it a good try anyway.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

Is it possible that, these days, heavily agenda-laced ideas from afar glow within each of us with such power that we mistake them for our own? Possible that the way we receive information, and the form in which it arrives, is causing certain issues to assume an exaggerated importance in our lives, out of proportion to 1) the extent to which these issues actually affect us and 2) what we might be able to do about them? Isn't this frustrating, because it makes us feel that our influence ought to be vast, but it isn't? Is it possible that we have come to feel responsible for too much, for everything, even things outside of our control, and that this makes us feel like gods who have been unfairly disempowered? Isn't it depressing, feeling like a demoted god? Doesn't it fill us with despair, which might make us less effective if a time comes when we actually can do something, and might also mess with the enjoyment we should be feeling re the rest of our lives?

### **Thought Experiment No. 5**

There's a parable, recounted in Paulo Coelho's novel "Veronika Decides to Die," among other places, about a kingdom whose well was poisoned by a wizard, such that a person drinking from the well would be driven insane. Everyone in the kingdom drank from the well, except the king and queen, who had a separate well for their use. Alarmed by the madness of the people, the king tried to issue edicts to control their behavior. To the insane populace, these edicts sounded like nonsense. The king's problem was this: If he refused to drink from the poisoned well, which would make him insane, the people, believing he was insane, would dethrone him.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

Is it possible that, in our culture, we each have our own customized, algorithm-enforced poisoned well? And that certain "wizards" have learned that lies are an especially potent form of poison? And that, therefore, the wells to which those "wizards" have access are more full of lies than others? And that even the wells that are full of truths aren't great, since the method of delivery tends to enlarge one truth (one way of seeing) at the expense of others, thereby making it difficult to sustain such fragile things as ambiguity, doubt, sympathy, complexity, or genuine curiosity?

Might we then consider ourselves a culture being actively poisoned, a poisoning to which we are enthusiastically consenting?

What might we do about this?

Provide specific examples.