

Mr. Trump Has Done One Good Thing for Us Already

'Opinions' is one of the hot-button topics of today due in large measure to the impact of President Trump's behaviour as presidential candidate and president of the United States. The combination of Mr Trump and social media has created the 'perfect opinion storm' which continuously engulfs the news media and claims attention from all of us. There has been no U.S. president like Mr Trump for the daily impact he has had on us in the way he has changed the 'climate of opinion' about opinions.



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE: WWW.CNN.COM

A major effect of 'Storm Trump' is that his behaviour has single-handedly legitimated the expression of any 'opinion' and his example has validated the sense of entitlement to 'my opinion' no matter how outrageous, discriminatory, or ill-founded. He has brought confusion to political discourse and provoked the normally restrained news media into calling him a

liar, describing his statements as lies, and characterising his behaviour in the strongest personality terms.

Trump-as-role-model challenges us to **think about how we form, hold and use opinions** – an unintended benefit perhaps, but one we should not (cannot?) forego. The crisis he has unleashed has also gifted us an opportunity (or forced the necessity?) to bring some clarity to the confusing field of opinion-making.

A Case Example

We can use Mr Trump himself as a case study for us to think about shaping our opinions and, specifically, whether we form the opinion that he lies.

Keeping a grip on truth in the midst of 'Storm Trump' demands much effort and diligence, more than most of us can sustain. In time, we can expect that even the rolling audits which

various news media and political websites are compiling on the truthfulness of his words and deeds will become demanding.

Many people will have an opinion about Mr Trump's behaviour such is his impact worldwide and this poses the question as to **how this opinion was formed or acquired**. And, if we do not have an opinion already about the status of his endless flow of claims we decide, one way or another, where we stand on Mr Trump relationship to truth in a way that we have not had to do about most U.S. presidents.

We have two options: *opt out or engage our minds*.

For many, even at this early stage of Mr Trump's presidency, his behaviour is too much and it is already a question of 'tuning it out' to preserve peace of mind. Alternatively, his opinions behaviour requires economizing on our attention – coming to a sustainable assessment of it so that we need not think about his every turn.

How to Be the Adult in the Trump Era

The question of adulthood and growing up is often lurking around discourses of Trump, often seen and described as an over-grown child. But perhaps there is also a need to mature on our part in relation to how we think and talk about Trump. Such an observation is made by David Brooks, a *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist and generally fair observer of the U.S. *He begins by venting some frustrations*:

"For the past two years Trump has taken up an amazing amount of my brain space. My brain has apparently decided that it's not interested in devoting more neurons to that guy. There's nothing more to be learned about Trump's mixture of ignorance, insecurity and narcissism. Every second spent on his bluster is more degrading than informative."



© MIKE O'DONNELL

But, continuing about 'listening to his brain for a change', Brooks elaborates that it would "mean trying, probably unsuccessfully, to spend less time thinking about Trump the soap opera and more time on questions that surround the Trump phenomena and this moment in history."

"It is clear that Trump is not just a parenthesis", Brooks says, and after his presidency "things will not just snap back

to 'normal'". Referring to 'dying old demographic, political, even moral orders', Brooks considers that "... what comes after will be a reaction against rather than a continuing from."

Ultimately, Brooks asks:

"What lessons are people drawing ... and how will those lessons shape what comes next?"

Indeed, we must, as reasoning persons, go on to ask **what ought we to do?** In brief, the answer is: 'grow up'.

Susan Nieman, in her book *Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age* (2014: 6-8), puts the matter very well when she says:

"Growing up is more a matter of courage than knowledge: all information in the world is no substitute for the guts to use your own judgment..."

and continues

"...courage is required to live with the rift that will run through our lives, however good that may be; ideals of reason tell us how the world should be; experience tells us that it rarely is. Growing up requires confronting the gap between the two – without giving up on either one."

Referring to how common it is “to meet people who are stuck in the mire of adolescence” and, noting the stance that it is brave to face the rot of the reality that there is no place for ideals any more, Nieman counters:

“Such a standpoint is less brave than you think, for it demands absolutely nothing but an air of urbanity. Far more courage is needed to acknowledge that both ideals and experience make equal claims on us.”

We could add that this is the stance of common cynicism—an easy stance to take up, maybe the easiest.

For Nieman, the bottom line is:

“Doing what you can to move your part of the world closer to the way it should be, while never losing sight of the way that it is, is what being a grown-up comes to.”

The gap between *is* and *ought* – how we see the world as it is and how we think it ought to be – is the central challenge in forming a sustainable stock of opinions to guide our behaviour. Just as “so much more is possible than the world we know”, which leads to making the “claim about how things ought to be” (Nieman, 2015: 28), we too can enlarge our own sense of the possibility for ourselves as we deliberately and responsibly shape our stock of opinions in a changing world.



© MIKE O'DONNELL

Closing the gap between the *is* and the *ought* – the way our world is and the way it should be – is about putting things right. How we bridge that gap requires us to make leaps by exercising our power of judgment when combining reason and passion. We make this leap based on trusting that we are a ‘well-made self’ (Barzun) because we know how we have

made it ourselves and have practised living with this dualism without running for simplistic resolutions to this dilemma.

As Nieman says, "...if we are ever to arrive at an *adulthood* we need not merely acquiesce in but *can actively claim as our own*", we must operate at the "space between *is* and *ought*...**the space where questions arise.**"

Questioning is the fundamental operation among people. We can disagree on opinions, facts, and ideas and so on but **we can *always* ask questions of each other.**

Again, Nieman spells out the implication:

Since the questioning activity does not end, "growing up is a matter of holding the *is* and the *ought* in balance, it will never be a stable position: each will always seek the upper hand. **Hence growing up is not a task that ever stops.**"

So it is with making, forming, using, and holding opinions (the topic of our [previous blog post](#)). Opinions are answers to questions we ask ourselves and each other. They are not knowledge – our stock of opinions not a stock of knowledge – but rather what we have come to believe is true while not being certain. Because they govern our behaviour and because *they are not certain* we must continue the search for truth. A commitment to searching for truth as an element in one's preferred best working attitude is what distinguishes an adult mind from an immature one.

In a word, growing up demands that we think, *and* think for ourselves, and engage with each other in dialogue.

Another Answers to Trumpism: Modesty?

Brooks also writes on why modesty and moderation are superior to the spiralling 'purity movements' of today and says "It seems like a good time for assertive modesty to take a stand." He suggests that **MODESTY** is the most powerful answer to fanaticism. Modesty he says is a way of knowing the world which opposes 'conspiracy mongering mind-sets':

"It means having the courage to understand that the world is too complicated to fit into one political belief system. It means understanding there are no easy answers or malevolent conspiracies that can explain the big political questions or the existential problems. Progress is not made by crushing some swarm of malevolent foes; it's made by finding balance between competing truths — between freedom and security, diversity and solidarity. There's always going to be counter-evidence and mystery. There is no final arrangement that will end conflict, just endless searching and adjustment."



© MIKE O'DONNELL

[Here](#) is his Opinion article.

In another similar article David Brooks's writes on the position of moderates and their importance in the present political landscape.

"What Moderates Believe" points out that the answer to the rule of Trump and the right is not the left, but an alternative to "warrior mentality" that pervades both camps.

Brooks describes moderates as a "voyager type" who sets out to engage with ideas from different sides and is vigilant in the ideas she takes up depending on the situations she finds herself in.

Read, and enjoy, the full article [here](#).