

Response to Andrew Samuels and Betty Sue Flowers

Steve Zimmelman, Ph.D.

Both these talks are gems and I feel privileged to be in the company of such creative and ethical minds. I want to thank Andrew and Betty Sue for making the long journey to be with us, and to share their intelligent, challenging, thoughtful, pithy, humorous takes on different but related dimensions of the current situation in the polis.

Where we locate ourselves as individuals within a community of analysts and psychotherapists living in the bubble of a highly educated urban community like the Bay Area is at the core of what I wish to contribute to the discussion as respondent. For myself, coming from a very solid working class background with immigrant grandparents who fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe, a father who worked nights sorting mail in the Brooklyn post office and a mother who worked as a typist in Manhattan, I have been privileged to be able to live out a version of the American dream. I share this snippet of my story because it gives you a sense of where I place myself within the broader narrative of how for so many the promise embedded within the story of working people in this country is drifting

further and further away. I see both Andrew's and Betty Sue's talks as reflective of their respective locations, and as they plumb the depths of individual and collective psyche in this election, I wonder how much they are able to account for the fear and resentment underlying the loss of the myth – and the reality - of working and middle-class America.

Betty Sue points out how we are witnessing a deeply disturbing shift that substitutes persona for character, where image becomes increasingly independent of character. Her analysis of the problem goes further to show how authenticity, normally thought to relate to a universal standard of character, is being redefined as a congruence between the image one wishes to project of him or herself on the one hand and how one performs that image on the other. She argues that there is a confusion of authenticity with truth. She taps into the anger characterizing the spirit of the times, an anger in which she also astutely sees as a necessary, attractive energy of the id. In this light, I want to note Gail Collins observation in yesterday's NYT: "Boring people have never looked better."

Betty Sue makes much of the image, the persona, being bifurcated from character. While I appreciate the truth in this, I also want to interrogate it further. I might try to restate her point as follows: what was previously symbolic (which we can regard at its deepest level in terms Jung described as the best possible description or formulation of a relatively unknown fact) has been deflated and flattened, and made into a mere image, a phrase, a claim to truth with no backing in history, either recent or long past. Similarly, the sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard writes of the "fatal process" in which "there is a

definitive immanence of the image, without any possible transcendent meaning, without any possible dialectic of history” where “the medium enfolds exponentially around itself.”

Betty Sue’s comments suggest how the symbolic core of the nation, such as it has ever been, is in danger of being replaced by thin images colored by claims of greatness and selflessness, characterized by unabashed aims to overpower and dominate the other. We might say that the spirit of the times threatens to obliterate the spirit of the depths. Has this not always been so? Any yet, I would argue and suggest alternatively that in our present circumstance the spirit of the depths is embedded within the image, within the spirit of the times. Words and images reflecting racist, xenophobic, misogynistic attitudes reveal fears of the loss of a paradise – a paradise that never really was but that was held up as the national narrative of our freedom, our democracy, and the mythic guarantee that anyone who is willing to work hard can earn his or her place at the table. As we Jungians know it is myth that tells the story of our collective soul, that tells the deepest truths of who we are. In this way, the words and images in the election campaign that seem so bankrupt also carry within them a greater truth which is, in fact, the spirit of the depths: the fear and pain and anger of the middle class that has been the backbone of the nation, and that sees its own dreams drifting away as the income gap between rich and poor grows ever larger and as the dreams of a middle-class life for oneself and one’s children is increasingly more out of reach. Two weeks ago, the NYT endorsement of Clinton stated in part, “The 2016 campaign has brought to the surface the despair and rage of poor and

middle class Americans who say their government has done little to ease the burdens that recession, technological change, foreign competition and war have heaped on their families.” There is great anger about leaving the mythic paradise, even if it never was, or as Lee Hayes once remarked, “Things ain’t what they used to be, and what’s more they never were.” But that perspective doesn’t seem to penetrate people who are frightened and angry, who see their values and livelihood threatened by a new economy in a new world comprised and even run by people who look different than they do and who might just have a name that sounds middle eastern. The price of consciousness, of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is to be barred from paradise, and having to work for one’s bread for the rest of eternity. That is not something most of us would vote for.

Andrew’s talk evokes the soulful dimension in electoral politics. What impact does it have on our core self to vote according to an ethics of responsibility – what he calls “clothespin voting” – or if we follow an ethics of conviction and vote our conscience regardless of the reality on the ground. We have had numerous discussions around our dining room table with our twenty-something daughter who is toying with voting Green because she cannot stomach either major party candidate. Andrew asks poignantly, “how can you vote with a clothespin on your nose and still retain connection to these deeper considerations?” He suggests we might approach this in two stages: voting responsibly in the short run to create a space for the operationalizing of

responsibility ethics in the interim, and setting the stage for voting out of conviction in the long term. All good points.

The second half of Andrew's talk is about violence. I see the connection between the two parts of the talk – voting and violence – reflected in how he breaks through the shibboleth of non-violence as the only plausible response to deplorable conditions. He states, “Political violence may be seen as the ultimate expression of passion in politics and as a sign, whether we like it or not, of an ethics of conviction. But, on the other hand, political violence has the immediate effect of halting whatever conversations might be going on and hence may be judged to be an abject failure of politics.” Andrew brings the shadow of violence to consciousness in a brilliant way that allows it to be regarded in the context of this dark time when there is so much anger and rage - when the threat of violence – or perhaps more correctly violence itself – surrounds us and threatens to engulf the national psyche. But has not the U.S. always been a country of violence, shown not only in the fact that we are gun-crazed but that the country was built on violence, including the attempted genocide of Native Americans, enslavement of African Americans and the war on young black men today, not to leave out the epidemic of violence shown in racial disparities in terms of poverty levels, unemployment rates, educational attainment, and incarceration rates? And I would not want to omit mentioning violence against the planet - the rape of the earth.

I find myself appreciating that Andrew is asking these questions about political violence, and that he asks us to question whether the therapist who in an

unexamined way always advocates non-violence is somehow engaging in a form of analytic violence based in his or her own privilege. Yes, I say, there are some circumstances where violence may be justified. Yet at the same time are we even close to this in the U.S.? And if we are not - which I do not think we are - then I want to ask if this is the right time to be raising this question. With all this violence surging around us, is not asking us to ponder the justification for violence a way of pouring gasoline on the flames? As we know from analysis, timing is everything. Maybe we can get to this exploration later. Right now, in these times, it feels incendiary. On the one hand the fact that there is so much anger and violence all around, perhaps makes it particularly important, even crucial, for us to look at the potential for violence and its justifications. On the other, I can only hope that we approach our differences and glaring inequities through a peaceful democratic process that maintains a commitment to the sanctity of human life and that takes the high road and does not devolve to the lowest threshold. As Andrew said, the main problem with taking political violence seriously is how to turn off the faucet once it is turned on.

As we explore these issues, are we asking ourselves where we are located, trying to remain conscious that we are looking through our own lens, in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality? Where do any of us place ourselves? Even asking these questions, making these comments in the ways we are, places us at a particular vantage point colored by our privilege, including that of analysts, psychotherapists, and others. To not realize that we speak from our own perspective, one among many, including that of “the basket of deplorables,”

we risk falling into the abyss of alterity, othering those who are different than us, and, at the same time, standing more isolated from our own shadow.

Both these wonderful talks end with a call to the need to find the soul in the body politic. Betty Sue plaintively asks us to have a capacity for love and individuation, to yearn for wisdom, and to work together for the good of the nation. I love her line, “If I were to look deeper into the energies of these two candidates in a spirit of love and yearning, I would see the underlying energy of love in Hillary’s theme, “Better Together” and the necessary energy of power in our yearning, as a people, to “make America great again.” These words go a long way in holding the tension of the opposites, the image of unity and mutual support on the one hand, the image of power and strength on the other. Andrew comes back from being far out on the limb of exploring political violence to remind us that the transformations needed by the collective political world are inextricably linked to addressing the needs of the individual political soul.

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