

Revolution and the Humanistic Ethic

By

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There's a corner on Main Street in downtown Louisville, Kentucky where five manhole covers are embedded in the sidewalk on permanent display for their historical significance. You might not think of manhole covers as historically significant but nearing the turn of the 20th century, when underground utilities were first emerging, a lot of people were concerned about having things like gas and sewage invisibly piped underground directly to and from their homes. So utility companies commissioned exquisitely designed manhole covers to help make the idea look more appealing. Over the years, most of these ornaments have been covered over by layers and layers of asphalt. But Louisville, where iron foundries were once abundant, is considered the mecca of manhole covers and remains a place you can see and appreciate some of their intricate floral and gothic designs.

These days we don't think much about our underground utilities. Out of sight, out of mind, and we no longer need artful coverups to help us feel better about them. This is true of much in our society. It's why sewage treatment centers are among the most beautiful facilities in any community, so we don't think much about what's going on behind the scenes, or under our feet, or sometimes right under our noses.

Today a disturbing and deadly pattern of police brutality against unarmed black men has yet again been shoved right in front of our faces. The outrage that's followed has led many to wonder how such horrors can happen. But these cruelties and abuses, like underground utilities, have been happening a long time, right under our noses, but most of us haven't paid attention because our societies have been superficially beautified to prevent us from noticing. The only reason so many more are noticing now is because cellphone cameras have suddenly blown the lid off the matter, like underground gas explosions blowing the covers off manholes.

Police brutality and racist policing have been part of the underground utility upon which American society has been operating hundreds of years. This isn't to say all police officers are racist or brutal, because they aren't, but, like all of us, they are caught up in a system that looks fine on the surface but hides an ugly and explosive reality beneath the very foundations upon which we are living. And God help anyone courageous or stupid enough to blow our cover.

Just recall what happened when Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Barak Obama's minister at the time, for quoting Malcom X after 9/11, "Americas chickens, are coming home to roost," for which he was widely condemned by the national media. How dare he criticize our beautiful manhole covers and their engraved slogans, "America is the greatest nation on Earth ...

America the beautiful ... land of the free, home of the brave." What Wright went on to point out is that America itself has continuously engaged in terrorism since its inception, beginning with terrorizing the Nation's original occupants, then terrorizing the Africans it kidnapped from another land to live in fear as slaves, and the continued bombings of other lands, like Grenada, Panama, Libya, Sudan, Vietnam, Nagasaki, Hiroshima, killing mostly innocent civilians, along with supporting terrorism in other countries against people like the Palestinians and black South Africans.

These behaviors have been going on beneath the currents of our daily lives forever, prettied up by artful dodgers who make everything look and smell far better than it is. As William James once said, "We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world really is."¹

Today, in Germany, instead of embedding manhole covers in cement—lids than can never be lifted—since 1992 Germans have been embedding Stolpersteine outside the former homes and workplaces of the Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, socialists, and others taken away by the Nazis. These brass plated bricks state "Here lived ..." followed by the names of those Hitler had removed and exterminated. The word *Stolperstein* means, "stumbling block." That's what we're missing in our country, markers to remind us of all the ways we've stumbled, dooming us to endlessly repeat the same terrible mistakes. Instead of embedding our coverups in concrete, we need to embed reminders of our worst deeds in order to learn from them and finally move on. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Gardner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and so many names, known and unknown, going back hundreds of years, are our stumbling-blocks. They will keep tripping us up until we honor their memories by changing our ways.

Given the level of protest going on, the death of George Floyd may mark a turning point. Then again, it may not. We've been here before, just a short time ago. Remember the rioting that happened when all those officers were acquitted after being videotaped while brutally beating Rodney King in 1991? Yet names like George Floyd's continue to mount. If there is any good to come from this moment in our long tragic history, it is the hope that this time will be different, that, after 500 years of white supremacy in our society, this time will finally be the turning point.

If so, then there are two approaches to this turning, one that may result in only more injustice, and one that could end in the genuine transformation we're longing for. The question before us today is are we going to have a rebellion or a revolution? It's an important distinction because rebels and revolutionaries are often fighting in the same causes in the

¹ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1902, 1958, p. 85.

same ways. So it's difficult to tell them apart. The difference is in their motives and what they are ultimately hoping to achieve. Or, more pointedly, the difference is in *our* personal motives and what *we* are ultimately hoping to achieve. "Know thyself," Thales, the first Greek Philosopher said, and if we are to succeed in finally ending racism in our society, we have to examine and know our motives, for there is a rebel and a revolutionary in all of us.

Rebels and Revolutionaries both want change, and they are both justifiably angry. But rebels tend to act in their own self-interests, while revolutionaries act in the interests of others, and ultimately to benefit the whole of humanity. A rebellion is a local, personal, temporal event that ends when the rebels are in power. A revolution is driven by universal imperatives, like justice, freedom, equality, democracy and ends when more people have been empowered to live their lives unhampered by authoritarian systems and regimes. The etymology of *rebel*, composed of *re* and *belle*, means to "wage war again." It's about repeating old patterns of violence and power. Whereas "revolution," as the word implies, means truly turning things around. It means we stop repeating old patterns of violence and power.

In *Escape From Freedom*, Erich Fromm also distinguishes between the *rebel* and the *revolutionary*. In essence, he explains, the *rebel* is someone who feels powerless and is fighting to become powerful, whereas the true *revolutionary* is fighting to change society for the good of all. The *rebel* is selfish; the *revolutionary* is altruistic. The *rebel* is an authoritarian character; the *revolutionary* is a genuine liberator. During war, for instance, the revolutionary will treat their enemies humanely, taking prisoners and treating them according to the rules of the Geneva Convention for example. The rebel, on the other hand, being an authoritarian character, may torture, humiliate, rape, and even kill them with utter disregard. In a civil demonstration or protest, the revolutionary will march peacefully but boldly to confront systems of injustice, even if it means placing oneself in harm's way, while the volatile rebel may quickly turn violent, storming the castle, so to speak, destroying and stealing property, and even beating and fighting with their opposition.

We need only consider the legacies of figures like Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the Socialist reformer who wanted to bring greater access to food, housing, healthcare, and education to his people, but once he got into power he also began suppressing journalists, arresting his political adversaries, manipulated election laws, made himself President for life, and, before he died of cancer after eleven years in office, there was widespread government corruption, deficit spending, and shortages that were as bad as ever. The same can be said for Chairman Mao in China, Vladimir Lenin in Russia, and Fidel Castro in Cuba. After the socialist revolutions that ushered them into power, they became more concerned about keeping that power than fulfilling the humanitarian goals that got them there. "A rebel" Fromm says, "is one who wants to overthrow authority because of his resentment and, as a result, to make himself the authority in place of the one he has overthrown. And very often, at the very moment when he reaches his aim, he makes friends with the very authority he

was fighting so bitterly before.”² But even if the rebel doesn’t make friends with one’s old adversaries, the rebel tends to act just like them.

True revolutionaries, by contrast, those who genuinely want to turn the world around, figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, are motivated by the humanistic ethic, the goal, that is, of genuinely making the world better for everyone, even at their own expense. Revolution results in lasting change. Rebellion results in more of the same. Revolution results in greater freedoms for everyone. Rebellion ends only with another tyrant in power.

And because both these tendencies dwell in all of us, we need a moral compass to help guide our decisions and actions in turbulent times. I believe that compass ought to be the humanistic ethic, which Erich Fromm says, “is based on the principle that ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ is what is detrimental to [humanity], *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare.*”³ And what do we know of human welfare? What is it that is good for us?

At the very least, according to Abraham Maslow, we have a hierarchy of needs, beginning with our basic physiological needs—food, water, shelter, clothing, to which I would add healthcare and education—followed by our need for safety and security, then our need for belonging and love, then our need for recognition and accomplishment, concluding with our need to self-actualize by achieving our fullest potential. With this end in mind, Erich Fromm says that every society is morally obligated to make certain “that the unfolding and growth of every person is the aim of all social and political activities.”⁴ Everything we do should be with the goal of empowering individuals to live well and achieve their potential. Nobody can be left out or our entire society has failed.

Contrast this with the horrible reality the death of George Floyd reminds us is the underground inhumanity our society is erected upon. Yet it’s not inhumane because of such brutality alone, but also because of the inhumane sentiments and systems that make it possible for such prejudice to manifest so unimaginably to begin with. These sentiments and systems eventually prevent all of us, but especially our African American and other nonwhite citizens from fully unfolding because they are too afraid or too stifled to do so. The extrajudicial murder of George Floyd reflects the inhumanity of a society that is more interested in maintaining power through terrorism than empowering everyone with the freedom and opportunities to fully unfold.

This is the core of what Rev. Al Sharpton meant when he spoke so brilliantly, powerfully, and unforgettably at Floyd’s memorial service this week. “The reason why we are marching all

² Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, The Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1966, p. 140.

³ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

over the world is we were like George, we couldn't breathe, not because there was something wrong with our lungs, but that you wouldn't take your knee off our neck. We don't want no favors, just get up off of us and we can be and do whatever we can be."⁵ It's a cry for society to stop preventing some people from achieving their highest need to self-actualize, from being all they can be, from fulfilling their greatest potential. But they can't do that when they are living in a police state, which is what it is like in some of their neighborhoods, where they are under the heels and knees of tyrannical authorities whose whole purpose is to hold them down. They can't reach the top of the pyramid when the political pyramid scheme enacts a racist drug war to criminalize and disenfranchise them; or imagines fictional gangdoms wherever their endangered children gather to play. They can't reach the top when society's failed economy keeps too many below the poverty line, struggling just to have healthy food and clean water, struggling to have adequate healthcare and well-funded education and a living wage. They can't rise above it all when the very people who are supposed to keep them safe and secure along their path are a constant source of terror and a threat to their very lives; when just walking or driving down the street could be a death sentence.

This is why the humanistic ethic, with its goal of human welfare and individual unfolding, must become the sole criterion of everything we do, including how we police. And I believe it must also be the core value that determines how we protest, so that we bring a genuine revolution in our country resulting in lasting and meaningful change, and not just another short-lived rebellion.

As liberals we must particularly remain mindful of the humanistic ethic by looking to the failures of our own past. The Bolsheviks and Maoists were liberal socialist movements founded upon economic equality. But their sole criterion was only to provide the bottom tier of human need: State sponsored food, shelter, clothing, employment, medicine, and education, but at the cost of the freedoms we also need in order to be autonomous individuals who can fully unfold. Capitalism, on the other hand, makes much of freedom and the right of every individual to do as they please, especially those at the top, but does little to secure the most basic needs for all its citizens.

The problem, in my opinion, is not Capitalism any more than Socialism is the solution. The problem is the utter disregard for human welfare and potential that has always flowed beneath the foundations of American life. The solution, no matter what kind of economy we favor, is the humanistic ethic because it requires us to establish systems that take the whole pyramid into account for every person. A society that does less is a failed society. An economy that doesn't work for everyone is a failed economy. Law enforcement that doesn't serve and protect everyone, fails us all.

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/04/869721514/hundreds-expected-at-memorial-for-george-floyd-after-days-of-nationwide-protests>

Today, despite the rioting and vandalism and looting we have seen, millions of protestors in the U.S. and around the world have remained peaceful though forceful in their insistence the name George Floyd be our last stolperstein. There is a murderous and oppressive undercurrent beneath our feet tripping us up, and a stench of death right under our noses that can no longer be denied by ornate coverups. It feels like there are enough revolutionaries out there now to finally turn this horror around.

As Al Sharpton said on Thursday, “George Floyd’s story has been the story of [all] black folks because ever since 401 years ago the reason we could never be who we wanted and dreamed of being is you kept your knee on our neck. We were smarter than the underfunded schools you put us in, but you had your knee on our neck. We could run corporations and not hustle in the street, but you had your knee on our neck. We had creative skills, we could do whatever anybody else could do, but we couldn’t get your knee off our neck.”

That must be the goal of our protests, not punishment and power, but a revolution that sets the captives free, the captive souls, the captive minds, the captive creativity, releasing the full potential of everyone in our society, especially those who have been terrorized and suppressed and stymied for hundreds of years. It’s time to stop criminalizing and policing those living in black neighborhoods, and brown neighborhoods, and poor neighborhoods. It’s time to stop spending 75 percent of our taxes on criminal justice and to start adequately funding human wellbeing, including education, housing, and healthcare. It’s time to demilitarize our poorest and blackest neighborhoods and dignify them instead. It’s time to end prisons, expunge the records of those caught up in a half-century old politically motivated racist drug war and make reparations to the lives it has ruined. It’s time to stop manhandling and to start hands-off policing. It’s time for this time to be different! It’s time for a revolution. It’s time for the humanistic ethic. It’s time for everyone to have the fundamental freedom of achieve their full potential. It’s time to get our knees off their necks!