An Intractable Malaise

We live in relatively good, yet troubling times. Economic stability, low rates of crime and stable, governing institutions tends to predict good life satisfaction for Americans. However, our current political climate has never been so vitriolic, with political opponents viciously attacking each other’s personhood. The uncertainties associated with political and cultural shifts proposed by candidates running for president leaves us confused and dizzying.

We are susceptible to being disillusioned, thinking relief comes from creating oversimplified strategies resulting from not asking the right questions, the ones that matter the most to us. We

analyze the causes of inflation, health issues, dysfunctional marriages and relationships, high unemployment, homelessness and poverty. A collective worry emerges; uncertainty and anxiety that hurts the quality of our lives. Many are paralyzed in a state of chronic helplessness and are investing ultimate faith for salvation delivered by a prophet. We cannot trust all in leadership positions to act in ways that serve the greater good, worrying they are motivated by self-interest and material gain. We share a collective disillusionment that is the product of a vital lie by leaders promising to have our interest and welfare in mind.

Robert Nisbet sums it up nicely:

It has become steadily clearer to me that alienation is one of the determining realities of the contemporary age …. By alienation I mean the state of mind that can find a social order remote, reprehensible, or fraudulent; beyond real hope or desire; inviting apathy, boredom, or even hostility. The individual does not only not feel a part of the social order; he has lost interest in being part of it. For a constantly enlarging number of persons, including, significantly, young persons of high school and college age, this state of alienation has become profoundly influential in both behavior and thought.

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Our society, democracy and culture grants us self-determination. We have innate needs including being autonomous, competent and to belong. Satisfying these and related needs promotes our well-being, survivability, psychological and physical growth toward optimal functioning. Central to achieving optimal functioning is knowing what matters to you the most.

Culture is a meaning making system with its social institutions, language, religion, arts, customs, language and much more. The values that regulate our culture are visible and play a central role in shaping our collective, cooperative behavior. An emphasis and recognition is placed on achievement, beating your competitor and displaying status, luxury symbols. We are an individualist society honoring our unique abilities, traits and autonomy in pursuit of success and meaning.

Cooperative behavior has produced a culture to satisfy our many needs and preserve our survival. Life expectancy has risen impressively and we’re less likely to experience a violent death. Our living standard has increased and we’ve made revolutionary discoveries in medicine to sustain life for souls living with chronic illnesses. Some Americans complain of long commutes to work, insecure jobs, inflation, chronic health issues and dissatisfying careers. These concerns

surface from uncertainty regarding what we really want out of life and economic stability. Alienation is a pervasive and stable, subjective feeling produced by living in an impersonal, industrialized society.

We are also innately altruistic, more than any other species. If we’re driven to maximize self-gain then why be selfless and help a stranger? We know the reward center in the brain’s limbic system is activated when we’re altruistic. Ironically altruism can also end one’s life when coming to the aid of someone being assaulted and dying in the process.

The ridiculously rapid pace of technology has simplified and complicated our lives with digital vulnerabilities. The vulnerabilities include data breaches, cyber threats, information leakage and other types of exploitation. We are so addicted and dependent on technology to obtain immediate access to resources to live efficient lives. Navigating our urgency driven and hurried lifestyles is dominated by creating efficient strategies to maximize time and decrease worry. If access to our technology is blocked stress levels increase. Imagine not having access to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tiktok or online gaming. Every day, fascination with new technology demands our immediate attention.

Irony and unpredictability are a fixed element of human nature. It’s an illusion to think you can immunize yourself from chance; unanticipated events that upset life. We are given to capricious, altruistic and benevolent behavior, only to be malevolent the next moment. Neuroscientists study the brain, theorizing and attempting to reduce hate, violence, narcissism and antisocial behavior to its neuronal components.

The Lord knew He took chances creating us and now we work at creating conditions for people to live peacefully without religious, political and other forms of persecution. We need governments led by ethical leaders whose systems serve the greater good. Historically, we painfully admit hate exists and it derives from fear, ignorance and mistrust. Hate is the most destructive element in human nature and it accounts for the epic number of deaths in history. Genocide and wars resulting from religious, political and racial intolerance has annihilated millions.

An aura of dysphoria has penetrated the lives of some Americans and chronic discontent is keeping some hopeless and uncertain about their future. Certainly living in an industrialized, urgency driven culture can undermine the search for our authentic self, depriving some of meaning and genuine, enduring happiness. We experience existential dread and alienation. One struggles to overcome an unrelenting, nagging feeling surrounding their place in the world and their future. The ultimate question remains what is the meaning of my life? The world may appear meaningless and purposeless for some. Unexpected change creates troublesome adjustments, leaving us susceptible for turning to maladaptive coping strategies. These are all ephemeral, temporary fixes to serious, chronic and complicated problems that will only persist until we make a genuine investment to modify our life. The world may not appear to be an ordered, coherent place and one loses faith that efforts they make to generate meaning may be illusory not be worth the investment.

In surveying Americans, estimates are that about 80% admit they’re under stress. The lifestyles some lead, including long commutes to work, dissatisfying jobs, worry about our children, our health, anxiety and uncertainty about whether we’ll be laid off can overload our system. We’ve

experienced economic downturns, political conflicts and we are emerging from a pandemic. Our minds and bodies have been compromised in epic ways and it carries serious long term consequences. At many turns, we’re needing to manage a concern before it becomes a crisis.

In addition, estimates indicate that 33 million, or 14% of Americans are problem drinkers. A pervasive atmosphere of discontent is undeniably present in contemporary times. It is attributed, in part to the furious pace we’re maintaining just to adapt to societal changes which can leave us emotionally and physically exhausted. We may experience life as complicated, impersonal and ever-changing in response to undesired change. Some are pulled away from appreciating commitments to family and friends. The existential vacuum we’re trapped in produces feelings of alienation and despair in a seemingly impersonal world. The pervasive feeling of helplessness leaves us powerless and wishing for an elixir or to be magically fixed. Remember—despite all of us experiencing stress in our daily lives, stress only becomes unbearable and a tremendous burden if you feel you have lost control—that you cannot enact healthy, adaptive change to restore homeostasis, fulfillment and purpose in life. The confusion we experience may result from conflicts around what we really want out of life. Our society often prescribes values and expectations for us and unless you stop, regroup and ask yourself if pursuing these societal values adds meaning and purpose in your life, you’ll be achieving for others and not necessarily you. We’re told to attend college, get married and have children, enter a career, purchase positional good (status objects) and conform in general.

Human beings are endowed with an authentic, true self that when expressed generates inner harmony, meaning and purpose in life. We attempt to satisfy our core needs, desire to increase self-awareness hoping that knowing ourselves better will add to life fulfillment. Discovering your true self will allow you to make decisions that better fulfill your social, physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs. Experiencing life fully is the ultimate journey and goal. The existential questions raising anxiety will be tamed, such as what is the purpose of my life, my reason to live and why am I here. Yet how many of us are motivated to express our authentic self? It would constitute an ultimate shame for one to ignore pursuit of their genuine self. The authentic self is the inner hero seeking expression and is a treasure chest needing to be unlocked. Unless it’s unlocked, your treasures will never shared with the world. The hero within you is an archetype deeply embedded in your soul and psyche.