

## Essay

This essay was written in response to an email from Rich Quatrone, where he lamented the loss of America's bright, though complicated, promise, a decline that began with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

I realize that I have lived more than half of my life under the weight of "Ronald Ray-Guns-Zap's" election. That's 1980; 40 years ago, and I am turning 67 in a couple months. Good grief. Grief indeed.

Yeah, Reagan brought us "Mourning in America"...and not enough people see that. "Hey, he brought down the Soviet Union!" The absurd claim. Yeah, and gave them Putin's oligarchy. Capitalism with all the gloves off.

I can barely do the math when I think of how many years of my life I have lived under the weight of GOP/conservative ideas. 1953 to 1960; 1968 to 1976; 1980 to 1992; 2000 to 2008; 2016 to ????. And, that's making huge allowances for the intervening years in these dates, when Dems were in charge....but weren't very liberal/left themselves. Better, but hardly fundamental, changes.

I had high hopes, sometimes "medically" induced with cannabis, that the 60's were taking us closer to a more perfect union. But, as Trump is a racist snap-back after Obama's election; Reagan's ascension was the final nail in those dreams. And, driving that nail started with Nixon's election in 1968.

It is so bizarre and ironic that a nation established, as you say, with such a glorious goal should have such a shameful history, too. The city on the hill, these days, is making me think of the mountain of sin in Dante's *Purgatorio*. As the middle Canto of *Divine Comedy*, it is seen as reflecting human life's struggle. Between great failure (*Inferno*) and great achievement (*Paradiso*).

We must see the truth while we're here, before these "end-points," and that is so much, so often, outside our grasp, our vision.

It's not everything, but it's so much: America cannot stomach or face the shame of its original sin of slavery. Upon which so much of its wealth was built. Greed and racism raised to national dimensions. We hoped the Civil War was a turning point, and it was in some ways. But, so much of the South denies the shame of its "peculiar institution." In fact, it built statues to distract itself.

Note the long history of racial violence in the South, since 1865. How often people strike out in anger and aggression and even violence when they are caught out, can't hide their evil actions. And, that virus infects the rest of the country, built on racial and class fears, maintained by the powerful, duping so many. The illness is one we can't shake, because we cannot face ourselves in the isolation of shame.

Trump is the apotheosis of this denial of shame; he seems incapable of feeling it about anything he's ever done. Like a person who cannot confront his worst acts, admit them, and explore what caused them. Not looking for expiation, but looking for the darkneses at one's core. Darkneses that, until seen and understood, dominate one's life. Shame is something we rarely talk about; we're ashamed to do so.

One does not face one's shamefulfulness out of some weird masochism. Rather, one faces one's shame to launch one's journey towards a life not focused on oneself alone. Ironic? Yes, indeed. As is so much in this life.

The convolutions are so many, like Laocoon battling the serpent.

Your thoughts got me thinking again, feeling the great sadness caused by the memory of hope and happiness in times of misery.

James Benner