

The Day After the Election: One Wisdom Elder's Response

By Belden Lane

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Like many others last night, I felt as if American democracy had been slapped in the face. Bigotry and meanness had triumphed. Women were demeaned, minorities threatened, immigrants told to go back home, the rest of the world warned that America would focus now on taking care of itself (becoming "Great" again).

The political analysts last night observed that non-college-educated, rural, *white men* were a huge force in responding to Donald Trump's message. As a threatened majority, they were making a last grasp for holding onto power. As a white male myself, growing up in a non-college, rural setting, I was appalled. But I also understood the powerful appeal of Mr. Trump's message.

I don't mean to dissociate myself (in an elitist way) from the rural white men who are also hurting in our country. My own state of Missouri leads the nation in the number of suicides among rural white men over fifty. They lack jobs. They feel isolated. In their loneliness, they despair. God forbid that I exclude any of the men who might look to us for compassion and integrity.

Yet I found myself reaching for Robert Bellah's now-classic book, *Habits of the Heart*, a reflection on the impact of rugged, male individualism in American democratic life. Donald Trump has been the epitome of the American hero as the loner, bucking the establishment. He's the gun-packing cowboy who rides into town, like Clint Eastwood in the spaghetti Westerns. Not being part of the community, he can take care of the bad guys. He may play fast and loose with the law, but he gets the job done. He's admired for his grit, his nasty temper, his readiness to stand up to anyone.

Mr. Trump has also echoed the role of the detective as loner (like Sam Spade, Al Pacino in *Serpico*, or Jack Reacher). This is the guy who aims at getting rid of all the crooks—not just the "little runts sneaking over the Mexican border," but those unexposed in high places who are part of a corrupt establishment. Again, the tough-guy "private eye" is effective only when he stands outside the system, going it alone.

A brilliant sociologist, Bellah talked about the genius and the curse of American individualism. He builds on the insights of Alexis de Tocqueville, a French historian who visited the US in the 19th century and wrote about *Democracy in America*. Both men admit that the individualistic spirit of American society gets things done. It inspires entrepreneurs. It celebrates those who are successful, who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, making it on their own. These are the great captains of industry, the CEOs of huge corporations.

But individualism, they warn, also involves a dangerous isolation from others. Beyond one's individual family, it discounts the importance of a larger community—especially of those who might be different from oneself. Its tendency is to think, "I made a success of myself; what's wrong with these others that they can't do the same?" It further discounts the importance of a body of tradition carried on from the past. A "self-made man" doesn't need a larger body of wisdom. He's his own master. He has no past or future.

Hence, Bellah bemoaned the loss in American life of what de Tocqueville had called "Habits of the Heart." These form a body of ideals and moral values to which Americans are committed, above and beyond their individual concerns: things like human dignity, equality, and justice—based in a broad sense of religious commitment—which form a common ground for public discourse in a society. These are broader and deeper than the individual ego. If we lack them, we end up with a fractured society, stripped of any moral integrity.

A few weeks ago, I delighted in listening to David Brooks and E. J. Dionne, two distinguished journalists, one conservative and one liberal, talking about this common ground with Krista Tippett on her NPR program, *On Being*. Their exchange was so stunning because we'd heard nothing like it during the entire presidential campaign. It was a unique instance of people speaking across ideological lines, engaging in a conversation based on common convictions of what America should stand for.

Bellah (and de Tocqueville) argued that when you lack this respect for tradition—for a shared moral life—you simply look to others to confirm your individual opinions or to overpower you with their own. Thus, the man who speaks the loudest, catching the attention of others in the most outrageous way, is the one most able to mold the opinions of the masses. Ironically, in a culture of individualism, *conformity* becomes the nemesis of the social order. The true individual who might emerge as *prophet*, speaking out for those whose rights are guaranteed by the moral common ground they share, is

shouted down by the tyranny of the majority, by those who are aggrieved by the rising threats to their own power and influence.

These, in short, are the white men who are threatened today by women, by men of color, by their gay brothers, by foreigners and outsiders of all kinds. *These* are the white men I have to love and to challenge in these days after the election. I'm a white man myself, formed by the values of the men's work with which I'm involved, through Illuman and the ManKind Project. I'm especially committed to Illuman's touchstones, grounded in the work of Fr. Richard Rohr:

- We are men transforming men through a power greater than ourselves.
- We are seeking a life-changing spirituality.
- Our primary concern is inner work that makes a difference in the world.
- We are fed by the wisdom traditions of forgiveness and radical inclusivity.
- Our work recovers traditional patterns of male initiation, affirms a masculine path to healing, reveals the true and false self, and honors the path of descent.
- We do this through the power of ritual, image, story, and council.

We also are committed to speaking the truth in love. That's why I'm reaching for words on this day when I'm feeling the same dread I felt on September 11, 2001. A nation (a world) is at risk. Men of compassion who know how to value the tradition *have* to speak. May it be so.