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What are the most profound challenges of the next twenty years?

We are facing a period in which religious dogma and ideology are becoming more and more important. The crisis of meaning in postmodernity is so deep that we're going to see more people wrestling with their isolation and existential emptiness by turning to religious institutions. These might be entirely new institutions, outside of churches and synagogues. But the fact is that God-talk will be with us for a while. Secularism, as precious as it is, is beginning to wane. The capitalist market is just so powerful that people are looking for forms of transcendence that have to do with something far removed from time and space. That's how deep the crisis of meaning actually is.

Why are things so bad right now?

The citizens of the American empire are feeling a profound sense of disillusionment. They elected a Congress that was supposed to take some accountability for the war, but the Democrats are having tremendous difficulty generating leadership. We'll see whether Hillary Clinton is anything more than a cast back to Tip O'Neill liberalism. We'll see whether Barack Obama has the boldness and courage to follow through. The result is a profound sense of powerlessness, and that is the worst thing a citizen can experience.

Is it going to get better or worse?

At the moment I'd have to say that things are getting worse. Militarism, authoritarianism and free-market fundamentalism are escalating at the same time as democratic accountability is waning. The real question of our time is whether we are entering a full-scale post-democratic age, in which the country is run by a coterie of unbelievably powerful and clever elites.

Nonetheless, I think we have a chance to turn it around. For one thing, the racist Southern strategy that the Republican Party has used to win elections for the past forty years is running out of steam. The fact is that a party can't continually run away from black folk, drive brown folk out of the country and continue to win elections. The Republicans risk ending up in the same situation as the Afrikaner National Party of South Africa: You consolidate your conservative base, but you can't win. At some point, the white moderate brothers and sisters will simply refuse to align themselves uncritically with a xenophobic party. And that will open up political opportunities for countervoices of justice to help preserve democratic practices and procedures. But there are some very strong forces against it. It will be an interesting contest.

So you're optimistic about the future?

The categories of optimism and pessimism don't exist for me. I'm a blues man. A blues man is a prisoner of hope, and hope is a qualitatively different category than optimism. Optimism is a secular construct, a calculation of probability. Black folk in America have never been optimistic about the future – what have we had to be optimistic about? But we are people of hope. Hope wrestles with despair, but it doesn't generate optimism. It just generates this energy to be courageous, to bear witness, to see what the end is going to be. No guarantee, unfinished, open-ended. I am a prisoner of hope. I'm going to die full of hope. There's no doubt about that, because that is a choice I make. But at the same time, the end doesn't look too good right now.

You appeared in "The Matrix," with its dark vision of technology enslaving the human race. How has technological change altered our culture?

Whatever its benefits, we have to keep in mind that technology is always under the aegis of capital, tied to profit-taking and moneymaking. It has fundamentally changed

how we relate to each other. To be able to talk to your loved ones around the globe on a cell phone is a beautiful thing. On the other hand, computers bring with them the same old pornography, hate speech and xenophobia we have in the real world.

What pivotal changes stand out in your own field?

Within the humanities, we feel marginalized. Our students are much more interested in business, finance, economics. We try to convince them what Dante was wrestling with or that Shakespeare still has some profound clues to the mystery of life – things they are going to have to confront, even after the hedge-fund experience – but we don't get through. My students at Princeton are brilliant and hardworking, but many of them probably won't wrestle with those big questions until their mother dies or they have to confront some other deep, existential reality later in life.

Does the world look different than you expected it to when you were growing up?

I've never had high expectations for human efforts, but I did think that the legacy of Martin Luther King, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Dorothy Day would be more widespread and last longer. I never imagined the backlash against King's legacy or the deeply conservative hegemony that has taken place in the past forty years. That surprised me.

Who are your crucial influences?

In terms of artistic or intellectual figures, it would be Anton Chekhov and John Coltrane. They exemplify an unbelievable level of spiritual maturity and intellectual adventure. They were not only artistic geniuses, they were also kind and loving toward those around them. They had a rare, human quality that someone like Beethoven – perhaps the greatest artistic genius of them all – lacked. With Chekhov and Coltrane, you get genius in the deepest etymological sense of geniality. A largeness not just of mind but of heart and soul.

What kind of legacy do you want to leave?

A legacy of love and service to concrete, breathing human beings, not just some abstract proposition. It's the difference between Socrates and Jesus. Socrates never really loved a concrete person, and that's why he never shed a tear. Jesus weeps not for a proposition but for concrete people who are wounded. That is my tradition. My kind of Christian faith is a rich footnote to prophetic Judaism in terms of steadfast love.

How will this time be remembered in forty years?

As the end of an ice age, a morally insensitive period from Reagan to the second Bush, when it was fashionable to be indifferent to the suffering of the most vulnerable. It's been about greed, power, wealth. It's about crushing and dominating others. I'm talking about everything from Wall Street to the White House and the brothers and sisters in the hoods. I agree with William James when he calls indifference "the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep."

People will look back and ask, "How could you have your children live in poverty? How could you have your workers pushed aside by technology? How did you allow your gay brothers and sisters to be scapegoated? How did you use code words for race – like 'welfare' and 'crime' and 'affirmative action' – to realign the electorate?" Democracy has always been concerned about the relation of the public interest and those catching hell. That's what keeps democracy going. Once that dries up, then the greed takes over.

America is a grand democratic experiment, but it has some major flaws yet to be worked out. It's unclear whether we'll ever work them out. That was true when I was born, and it's true today.