

Cultural Meditations













Technology and Democracy

These days, people are quick to blame technology for our crumbling democracy here in America. The commonly accepted narrative is that technology has made us all so extreme in our views that we cannot effectively engage in democratic processes. To be sure, as we speak powerful and psychologically manipulative social media technologies are busy wreaking havoc on mindsets around the country. And the press—the Fourth Estate of the Republic—which is supposed to be this foundational piece of a properly functioning democracy, is a shadow of its former self. Under constant attack since the emergence of the Internet, the press is now clearly failing in its unofficial, critical democratic functions.

While extreme polarization is definitely a problem, I don't think it's the real issue here. No, there's something much deeper and far more serious going-on: people just don't give a sh*t. Maybe this is the fault of technology or maybe we have just lost our way.

What's true is that we have become increasingly unwilling to subordinate our own private interests to the interests of our communities. While we are more than happy to assert our precious rights, we only reluctantly accept the profound responsibilities that come along with them. Our failure is particularly acute in local matters. Here, we can barely muster up the energy to get out and vote. In my little town of West Hollywood, where there are over 30,000 registered voters, the top vote getters were able to win city council seats with votes from only 10%-20% of the electorate.

WEST HOLLYWOOD CITY GENERAL MUNICIPAL ELECTION Member of the City Council

N	Lauren Meister	16.47%		6,070
N	Chelsea Byers	10.74%		3,960
N	John Heilman	10.63%		3,917
N	Zekiah N. Wright	10.59%		3,904
N	Robert Oliver	10.21%		3,762
N	John Duran	10.04%		3,702
N	Ben Savage	6.32%		2,330
N	Steve Martin	6.29%		2,317
N	Sarah Adolphson	6.08%		2,241
N	Marquita Thomas	5.90%		2,175
N	Jordan Cockeram	4.95%		1,823
N	Adam Darvish	1.80%		662

This is the true existential threat to our democracy. There can be no freedom without responsibility.

Ye, SBF and The Fame Monster

Ye's dramatic fall from public grace is yet another reminder of just how dangerous something like fame can be. We watch Ye lose his mind and shake our heads in condemnation. And rightfully so! What he is talking about is pure evil. But in our celebrity-obsessed culture it's hard to see the whole truth of what's happening here. You see, Ye is not the first nor will he be the last celebrity to crumble under the psychologically destabilizing weight of fame. And don't take what I'm about to say here as some kind of excuse or apology for Ye. He is completely responsible to accept the consequences of his actions and statements. This is more of a cultural warning that maybe we should think a little differently about fame.

It takes an especially mature person to experience fame for any extended period and make it out without psychological damage. Many don't even make it out alive. Just consider for a second how many famous people we've lost to self-destructive behavior. Take, for instance, the tragic story of SBF, another figure crumbling under the immense pressures of fame. I've been feeling unusually connected to this story because way back in my Stanford Law days, I once took a class from his father. He was a great teacher and a real genuine man.

While I don't know the truth of what happened at FTX, my gut is telling me that SBF knew exactly what he was doing. What's interesting about his case from a psychological perspective is that it looks like he's trying to convince himself that the story he's been telling the world—i.e. that this was some big mistake—is actually true. It's like a giant case of a sort of cognitive dissonance induced blindness. Look, I'm no psychological expert but this seems like a very plausible reaction. For someone like SBF, who rose to unexpected great fame with a mysterious but golden reputation, convincing yourself that you just made a mistake is a reasonable deflection from what must be an immense weight of guilt crushing his conscience. It's like now that he's experienced what fame feels like he desperately wants to believe that he genuinely deserved it.

Anyway, as long ago as the ancient world we understood that there was a problem with fame. In Plato's "Republic" there's this whole dialogue where Socrates is talking about the transformative power of fame and its tendency to impart wolf-like qualities upon the famous, especially leaders with absolute power. I think this werewolf idea is essentially right. Fame as a psychic or psychological energy is a transformative force and often manifests in destructive

behavior. Not always but sometimes. This is a rather frightening proposition when you consider that we live in a culture where almost everyone is pursuing fame.

Competing Visions for How to Change the World

This past month I read two fascinating books back-to-back. The first was S.C. Gwynne's "Hymns of the Republic," a captivating account of the dramatic events of the final year of the American Civil War. The second was "The Essential Gandhi," a curated collection of some of the most important writings of Mahatma Gandhi.

Both books are worth reading on their own. They are masterfully written and full of incredible stories, insights and ideas. Gwynne writes so well you feel like you are watching a great movie and the subject matter couldn't be more interesting. With Gandhi, you get writing that is pure, clear and persuasive and cannot help but feel inspired by his commitment to the path of Truth, his belief in the value and dignity of the individual and his courageous belief in a non-violent approach to political reform.

Something really interesting happens if you read them in quick succession like I did. The juxtaposition of Lincoln and Gandhi—individuals with remarkably similar life arcs—starting from humble beginnings and endowed with an usually self-disciplined temperament, they evolve morally to heroic proportions in the fight against evil, achieve a world transformative success and then die by the assassin's bullet—brings forth a rather profound question:

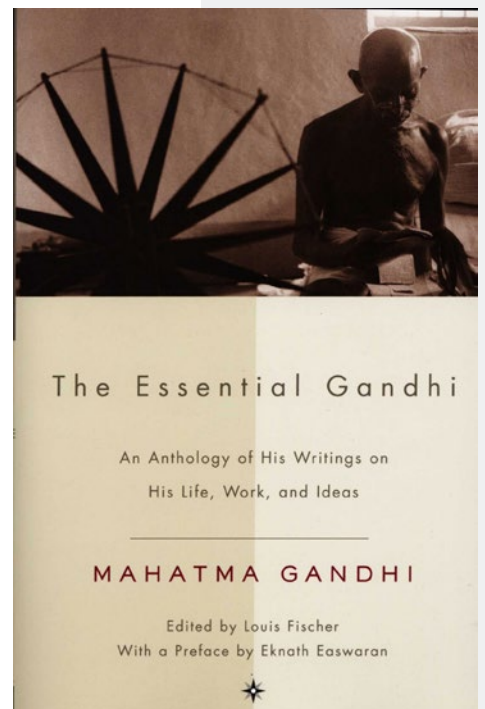
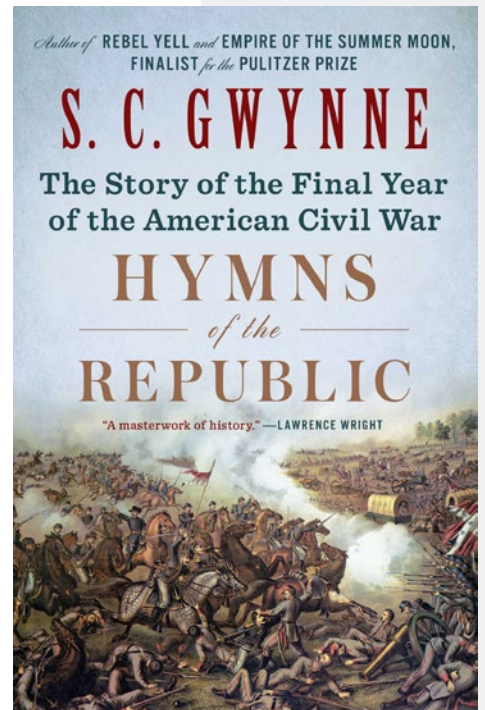
Just what is the right way to go about changing the world?

It's so fascinating that Lincoln and Gandhi, similar in so many ways, but differ in this one crucial aspect: the extent to which they were willing to use violence to achieve their aims.

I found myself thinking seriously about whether Gandhi's non-violent approach would've worked to eradicate the evil of slavery in America. His idea is as radical as it is courageous—essentially arguing that the right approach is not to overthrow but rather to convert the minds of the oppressors. It's an idea that is consistent with the great teachings of the world's religions—e.g. it's exactly what Jesus would advocate for, right?—and it certainly worked for Gandhi in India and later in the Civil Rights movement here in America.

But while I am inclined to agree with Gandhi, I don't think what Lincoln did was wrong either. Maybe non-violent methods like economic sanctions and boycotts of Southern goods could've worked to end slavery eventually but at what price? How long would it have taken to convert the racist minds of the slaveholders? Was it even possible?

What's interesting about Lincoln's story is that while he didn't set out to use violence as the means to end slavery—it was basically forced upon him by the secession movement—at some point during the war he became absolutely convinced that this was the moment and violence was the way. Knowing full well that thousands upon thousands of Americans would continue to die in brutal battles across the country, Lincoln refused the many calls to seek a negotiated peace, which was



at times a very politically popular idea in both the North and South. He was willing even to violate the constitution himself and supported Grant and Sherman's new rather radical approach of total war. For Lincoln it was the end of slavery and unconditional surrender, no matter what.

How do you even make a call like that? How do you weigh precious lives in the balance and make decisions where you just know many, many people are going to die? It's a staggering proposition. For what it's worth, I think Lincoln absolutely made the right call and I know he thought very seriously about this along these lines. His brilliant Second Inaugural Address gives us the clue. Consider this:

"Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'" □