

A Pivotal Year by Rollin Russell

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2017 could well go down in modern American history as the pivotal year for a cultural sea change. The scabs and bandages have been torn off four long term festering sores in the American body politic in 2017. We need treatment.

We peeked under the first bandage in mid 2016. Call it, "male predatory sexual aggression." Our genitalia grabbing President shrugged off his offenses as "locker room talk." But numerous women broke the silence, at considerable risk to themselves, and told us that it was a lot more than talk. Those women emboldened others to begin telling the truth about the abuse they had received from wealthy, powerful, egotistical men with whom they worked or that they encountered. This year it was a movie mogul whose gross behavior was exposed, and more and more women began saying, "#me too," and describing the abuse that had been inflicted on them by politicians, entertainers and others. 2017's flood of accusations has placed the issue front and center in our public awareness.

The second bandage was torn away in Charlottesville, VA. and exposed the deep and gaping wound that African Americans, Jews and others have long known as vitriolic racism. Many have acknowledged and analyzed systemic racism and the ways it is deeply imbedded in our society, but the raw, violent expression of it, veiled and substantially ignored in the last several decades, is now unmistakable in all its nastiness. Systemic racism has created a social and economic order that stifles the opportunity for thriving of minority persons, even as cries are raised alleging reverse racism against supposedly beleaguered white folks. Vitriolic racism is now unmasked, an unmistakable expression of the racist fear and hatred at the root of our common life. We must deal now with both forms of racism.

The gaping wound of gun violence is not new in 2017, but it has reached new levels of unspeakable carnage. The wholesale slaughter of innocents in Las Vegas, followed closely by a massacre of Texas worshipers and a host of other heinous shootings, show how far down the path of insanity we have come. It is not as though the sale of guns cannot be regulated effectively, especially to known criminals and the mentally ill. It is our fear that causes us to buy thousands of weapons and resist any effort to curtail their availability. Mix that with anxiety and aggressiveness on the part of some, and we have the present disaster.

The fourth festering sore is now unmasked by our convoluted US Congress as it makes dramatic changes to the tax code. Its name is "Unbridled Greed." It has been with us before, particularly in the Gilded Age, and now masquerades cynically as tax cuts for the middle class. Every analysis exposes its clear results: enriching the wealthy while impoverishing the poor, and pretty much everyone else. Along with the changes in taxation come the removal of regulatory restraints and protections for the public. This dramatic change is enforced by restrictions on voting rights and gerrymandered electoral districts which protect those who protect the wealthy.

Predatory sexual aggression, combined with vitriolic racism, the unchecked availability of guns and rigid economic inequality, all point to a deep seated cultural sickness: the compulsion to dominate. That cancer is fully exposed in 2017, and we will not solve any of its symptoms until we acknowledge the disease. And, this year will not be pivotal, we will not change, unless we begin to treat it. That's the diagnosis and the prognosis. So, what is the treatment?

Curing the compulsion to dominate is not a matter of legislation or elections. It is a matter of the heart of individuals and the soul of the nation. As a pastor I might be expected to prescribe religion as a way forward. It is maddening to acknowledge, however, that the fundamentalist versions of religion are enablers and encouragers of the compulsion to dominate. They want to dominate and do not hesitate to use politics to try to do it.

Religious traditions that teach love for the neighbor and seek justice for the poor; religions that believe that all persons are children of God, beloved by God, and deserve to be respected and cherished: they hold the antidote for our disease.

May they thrive and speak their truth boldly. They may be our best hope to pivot toward the nation of justice, compassion and unity that we aspire to be. 2017 will turn out be a pivotal year only if we begin to address these four crises. It requires confession, contrition and conversion: starting with ourselves and advocated to all, especially our cultural and national leaders. With regard to predatory sexual aggression we have at least made a start. We must begin to address and reverse the other three as well.