

Madness

** Crisis in America **



Political Poems and Prose

by

Larry J. Eriksson

October, 2017

Crisis in America

Donald Trump has led our country into madness:
he responds to problems with lies and bullying,
preferring to send flurries of laconic tweets –
Congress is gridlocked, our nation is in crisis.

* * *

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1945 (excerpt)

Blitzkrieg invasions, horrific death camps,
incendiary bombing, and atomic weapons –
all convincing demonstrations
of the willingness of the state
to practice mass murder
on an unprecedented scale.

In some ways, World War II
was a triumph of good over evil,
but it was also a triumph of
destruction over reason,
violence over peace,
collective force
over individual rights;
the veneer of civilization
was brutally peeled away –
it remains thin.

October, 2011

(from chapbook *Marching*)

Published as Letter to the Editor of the Wisconsin State Journal at madison.com, Aug. 3, 2016.

Watch 'Evita' to understand Trump

The easiest way to understand the attractions and danger of Donald Trump for our country is to watch the musical "Evita."

When Trump says he speaks for the people and is the only one who can solve their problems, he is repeating the same demagogic claims that Evita Peron made to Argentina. She also appealed to popular desires and promises rather than rational arguments. The result was a long period of violence and decline for Argentina.

The results of demagoguery are rarely good.

Opinion Page

Letters are welcome,
but poems are not accepted –
just too dangerous.

November, 2015

An American Election

“Narrow minds devoid of imagination. Intolerance, theories cut off from reality, empty terminology, usurped ideals, inflexible systems. Those are the things that really frighten me” (observed by a character in the 2002 novel “Kafka on the Shore” by Haruki Murakami)

panders to populist fears

“take back America”

racism, xenophobia, intimidation

“build a wall”

crude insults, empty promises, dangerous threats

“criminals, drug dealers, rapists”

mockery, bullying, name-calling

“Lying Ted, Little Mario, Crooked Hilary”

unpredictable demagogue, egotist

“lock her up”

incivility, vulgarity, misogyny

“you can do anything”

ridicule, irrationalism, isolationism

“I know more than the generals”

lies, ignorance, obscurantism

“trust me”

mean-spirited tweets, attacks foes for entertainment

“I have more power than they do”

email obsession, criticizes the FBI

“you can’t review 650,000 emails in eight days”

>>>

narrow electoral victory despite losing popular vote
some claim he “earned a mandate”
widespread marches after the election, he says
“professional protesters, incited by the media”
opposition warned, possible lawsuits or prosecution
advisor says “be very careful”
appoints Washington insiders and power brokers
how does this “drain the swamp”?
big benefits for corporations and a few jobs saved
check off another campaign promise

avoids press conferences, just uses tweets
no need to answer questions
secrecy, closed doors, keep them guessing
sounds like Putin
generals and corporate execs
running “The White House, Inc.”
now located at Mar-a-Lago, the new Versailles
keeping the king away from the people
open for business, but
...no trespassing

December, 2016

The Greatest Ever

Whopping achievements
and enormous modesty –
not a hint of pride.

April, 2017

Many newspapers will not accept poems for their opinion pages. This poem was accepted only when rewritten as prose (see p. 7).

The Road to Chaos

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”

George Santayana (1906)

Across eighteenth century France,
deference to the king declined,
his word no longer absolute,
the populace were desperate
for food and money to buy it,
angry women marched on Versailles
– his palace refuge from Paris,
factions competed for power,
people spoke of conspiracies,
many killed by state violence,
neighboring countries declared war,
chaos overwhelmed the nation.

In this country, we suffer from
a flawed national election –
some would say illegitimate,
the loser got more total votes,
not much respect for the winner,
many voiced their disapproval,
women travelled to Washington,
coalitions fought for power
and conspiracies abounded,
the president sends out tweet storms
slamming the media’s “fake news,”
but clings to “alternative facts,”
followed by false accusations
against President Obama,
all producing distractions and
confusion across the nation,
as he presides at his Versailles –
Mar-a-Lago, “The White House, Inc.”
open for business and war talk,
...but no trespassing permitted.

March, 2017

Prose version of "The Road to Chaos" published by The Cap Times online at host.madison.com/ct/opinion/, April 6, 2017; also published as "The Road to Chaos" by the Door County Pulse online at doorcountypulse.com/letters/ and the Peninsula Pulse (print), April 7, 2017.

French history speaks to today's U.S. politics
(prose version of *The Road to Chaos*)

George Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

In the 18th century, deference to the French king had declined. His word was no longer final. The people were desperate for food and the money to buy it. Angry women marched on Versailles — the king's palace, a refuge away from Paris. Various factions competed for power. People spoke of conspiracies, and many were killed by state violence. Neighboring countries declared war and chaos overwhelmed the nation.

In this century, our country has had flawed national elections — some would say they were illegitimate. Several times the loser got more total votes than the winner due to the arcane Electoral College. The president has limited respect. Many voice their disapproval and a million women march in Washington. Diverse coalitions fight for power and rumors of conspiracies fill the air. The president sends out tweet storms slamming the media's "fake news," but clings to his "alternative facts" including false accusations of wiretapping by President Obama. Disorientation and confusion spread across the nation.

Meanwhile, the president presides at his Versailles — Mar-a-Lago, "The White House, Inc." — open for business and war talk...but no trespassing permitted. Are we on the road to chaos?

New Math

Election results,
the winner got fewer votes –
it must be fake news.

March, 2017

At the Edge of the Abyss

The Democracy Index –
a four step ladder rating
a nation's democracy,
nineteen countries sit on top –
these are “full democracies,”
but not the United States.*

Our country now one rung down –
a sadly “flawed democracy,”
due to an election where
the loser had more votes,
reduced trust in government,
and political scandals.

If this isn't bad enough,
we are just one step above
so-called “hybrid regimes”
with irregular elections,
dysfunctional government,
and a silent citizenry.

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These dismal nations apply
pressure on the media
and partisan enemies,
have a weak judiciary,
an anemic rule of law,
and widespread corruption.

This may sound familiar,
but how close is the last step
where savage “dictatorships”
hold meaningless elections,
abuse civil liberties,
and silence their opponents?

February, 2017

* The list of 19 full democracies now includes such small nations as Malta, Mauritius, and Uruguay as well as large nations such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain, but not the United States; see article on the *Democracy Index* in the *Wikipedia*.

Why I Stopped Writing Poetry

"Bear in mind that bereavement is a process...More often than not, those who try to force themselves to 'get over it' quickly are unsuccessful" – caring.com

The inspiration has vanished –
words no longer seem adequate
when the electorate selects
a brash, self-centered narcissist;
a candidate who acquired votes
through lying and misleading tweets
rather than thoughtful discussion
of his plans and programs.

You might rationalize the flaws
in the Electoral College
and that his opponent received
nearly three million more votes –
but many millions supported
an unprepared, unsuitable,
unpredictable candidate
to be our president.

>>>

Due to the misguided actions
of those desiring major change,
the future is now uncertain
with many questions, few answers;
worn out by months of useless words
and now overcome by feelings
of frustration and impotence –
why should I write a poem?

November, 2016

A Tweet Too Far

The president talks in riddles
without direction or logic –
there is no substance to his words,
there is no thought to his actions,
they only bring mindless chaos.

Someday people may finally
admit he cannot do his job,
but will it be too late to stop
the president's last big mistake –
ending our sweet world with a tweet?

June, 2017

Trumped-Up Reality

Amidst unwarranted charges
and harmful foreign intrusions,
Hillary lost the election
despite getting many more votes.

After this flawed election
under the “leadership” of Trump,
respect for the presidency
has dropped to an historic low.

Many expressed their disapproval –
women gathered in Washington,
divisions in the White House brought
disturbing uncertainty and...

A budget that defies reason,
more bucks for the military,
no public television funds,
more tax credits for the wealthy.

“Trumped-up” accusations against
former President Obama
accusing him of wire tapping
Trump’s offices in Trump Tower.

An endless flurry of tweet storms
slamming the media’s “fake news,”
criticizing his opponents,
making threats and accusations.

Challenges to reality
creating anxiety and
sowing confusion and chaos –
distractions from our real problems.

March, 2017

The Captain of Our Ship

The storm grew in intensity,
the waves towering over us.

I had no worries, I knew that
the captain would keep us secure.

But when I arrived at the bridge,
it was empty, no one was there.

Where was the captain and the crew?
I scrambled down to his cabin.

When I knocked on his cabin door,
there was no response, I walked in.

The captain was holding a phone
and punching out a stream of tweets.

I told him of the empty bridge,
the growing power of the storm.

He told me to stop worrying,
things were going great, fantastic.

No time to stop and look at me
during his manic obsession.

I knew that the ship was sinking
buried by waves of tiny tweets.

July, 2017

A Comedy of Errors or a Tragedy?

A few Donald Junior emails
produce intense criticism
– Hilary released thousands without
generating much interest.

Junior’s supporter announces
just “much ado about nothing”
– only if you are aren’t concerned
about lying or perjury.

Those not bothered by nepotism
or collusion in the White House
claim the meeting was just routine
– why wasn’t it disclosed sooner?

The Russian says she knew nothing,
calls it a “misunderstanding,”
but Junior’s thoughts on the meeting
– get more dirt on Hilary, “great!”

And why did his father announce
in the campaign a “major” speech
on Hilary that never occurred
– what was planned, why was it cancelled?

Then Trump retreats to the White House,
no appearances for three days
– after leaving the G-19
while Congress remains in gridlock.

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He re-tweets “the greatest witch hunt,”
a typical overstatement,
but now that we have found a witch
– how many more are still out there?

The answer comes in a few days,
a second Russian attended,
so now we have a second witch
– we need to continue hunting.

Amazingly, it soon turns out
a third Russian was also there,
– why were they all at this meeting
and why didn’t we know sooner?

After numerous denials,
we learn Trump wrote Donald Junior’s
deceptive initial statement
– how many surprises remain?

An endless string of news stories
before the investigation
of Russia has even begun
– what in the world is going on?

These revelations have put Trump
on the defensive, but we know
war restores ratings, like Nero
– will he “tweetle” while the Earth burns?

July, 2017

The following poem is an alternate version of the earlier poem “Why I Stopped Writing Poetry” (p. 10).

The Power of Poetry

Where is the inspiration when
words no longer seem adequate,
when the electorate selects
a brash, self-centered narcissist –
a candidate who acquired votes
through lying and misleading tweets
rather than thoughtful discussion
of his plans and programs?

After months of vain rhetoric,
how do we overcome feelings
of frustration and impotence,
when the future is uncertain,
when many millions supported
an unprepared, unsuitable,
unpredictable candidate
to be our president?

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We can return to poetry
in our search for a new vision,
to help our imagination,
to form a moral direction,
to question unwise ideas,
to locate contradictions,
to fight extremist proposals,
and preserve our union.

Poetry is our tradition –
the land of opportunity,
liberty and justice for all,
a melting pot of immigrants
seeking the American Dream,
friendly neighbors helping neighbors,
poetic words that connect us
and bring us together.

November, 2016

The Emperor's New Clothes

Now the president takes
on the LGBTQ community
with a surprise attack
on transgender people,
a flying brick thrown
by yet another tweet,
neither the Pentagon
nor even the White House
know what to make of it,
we have a president
who “governs by tweet,”
no plans, no discussion,
just a laconic tweet
– his standard medium,
a crazy, ignorant,
and mean-spirited way
to run our great country,
and another attempt
to divide and distract,
– why does no one exclaim
“the emperor has no clothes!”

July, 2017

Demagogic Diplomacy

Trump storms into the UN,
where he is an outsider,
and welcomes them to New York;
then gives his bombastic speech –
he has all of the answers,
but doesn't know the questions.

He says America first,
endorses self-interest,
truculent egoism,
not great for relationships;
self-serving morality –
what about helping others?

A self-righteous narcissist,
a ranting, pompous bully,
who threatens weaker nations –
“no choice but to totally
destroy North Korea” and
twenty-five million people.

More arrogant name calling,
no sense of diplomacy,
belligerent diatribes
and contradictions abound –
he condemns the Iran deal
without a better answer.

Risky confrontations are
no way to bring the world peace –
better to use the UN
to improve relationships,
expand cooperation,
and enhance security.

September, 2017

Nightmares for Dreamers

On the campaign trail,
he told them not to worry –
he loves the Dreamers.

No concern for the
important jobs that they fill
or their families.

Then he ends DACA,
passes the buck to Congress
to solve the problem.

Too many to deport,
the message will drive many
into the shadows.

Congress is a swamp,
requests for action go in –
nothing emerges.

Struggling to live,
surviving on the margins,
minds filled with worries.

Then the president
says don't worry he will act
if Congress doesn't.

How do you live with
confusing contradictions,
capricious statements?

Dreamers still are told
to pack and prepare to leave –
all eight hundred thousand.

Life in America –
mercurial president
and broken Congress,

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...but he still loves
the Dreamers.

September, 2017

Prose version of “Nightmares for Dreamers” published by The Cap Times online at host.madison.com/ct/opinion/, September 12, 2017, and in print, September 13, 2017; also published by the Door County Pulse online at doorcountypulse.com/letters/ and Peninsula Pulse (print), September 15, 2017.

Nightmares for Dreamers

On the campaign trail, candidate Donald Trump told the Dreamers not to worry. He said he loves the Dreamers. Then as president, he announces an end to DACA and passes the buck to Congress to solve the problems that this will create. Our broken Congress has many requests for action, but accomplishes very little despite being controlled by Republicans.

The president says we shouldn't worry, since he will act if Congress doesn't. Despite this attempted reassurance, the Justice Department tells the Dreamers to pack and prepare to leave – all eight hundred thousand of them. No concern is expressed on how this will affect their personal lives, their families that include children born in this country who are citizens, or the important jobs that many of the Dreamers now perform. Many Dreamers are working adults who have complied with the government's requirements under the DACA program and trusted that our government would allow them to continue living in the only country many of them have known.

The president's announcement will drive many Dreamers into the shadows where they will struggle to survive on the margins, while their minds are filled with worries. Their lives have been upended by confusing, contradictory, and capricious statements by the president, the attorney general, and legislators. Although the president still says he loves the Dreamers, it would be nice if this was reflected in his actions or the actions of his cabinet members and Congress.

The following poems were inspired by the weakening by Donald Trump and the Republicans of environmental regulations at the state and federal level including their disdain for climate change scientists and their findings.

The Threat Within

Like a parasite,
our species evolved
dependent on nature
and other creatures –

hunting animals,
gathering berries,
and harvesting plants
with immense success.

Now we have become
a cruel pathogen,
threatening the Earth
and all its creatures –

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desperate billions
destroying the land,
changing the weather,
waging endless war.

A catastrophe
of our own making,
hostile to all life
and ruining Eden –

leading to collapse
unless we control
the impact we have
on our small planet.

July, 2015

(from chapbook *Magic*)

Point of No Return

Open-wheeled Indy race cars
flying around an oval,
extreme speed in a tight pack
that unnerves even the best,
then one car skids out of line,
touches another, causing
a cascade of collisions,
leaving drivers no option
but to crash into others,
many becoming airborne,
exploding into the wall,
creating mindless chaos.

A surging population
consuming resources at
an ever-increasing pace,
clearly not sustainable,
pollution, food shortages,
global climate change triggered
by fossil fuel consumption,
the problems are evident,
minimized by too many,
whose disregard of the facts
leaves a world out of control,
racing to oblivion.

October, 2011

(from chapbook *Marching*)

Living with Richard Parker

A boy and a tiger
named Richard Parker,
sharing a lifeboat
on the vast ocean,
looking for a way
to live together.

Reducing their needs
to a minimum
and depending on
each other as they
struggle to survive
on the endless sea.

Without the boat,
they both die;
without the boy,
the tiger starves;
without a companion,
the boy gives up.

>>>

Six billion people,
sharing our planet
with countless other
plants and animals,
need a new covenant
for the care of the Earth.

Waging war on nature,
wages war on ourselves –
bringing us closer
to the tipping point
of our little boat
on the sea of life.

(from chapbook *Marching, 2nd ed.*; published in *N.E.W. Voices*, v.1, no.3, Spring Summer, 2013; inspired by the novel *Life of Pi*.)

The following poems were written in response to the actions of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and the Republican legislature after their takeover of Wisconsin government in 2010. The winners marginalized the Democratic opposition, unfairly gerrymandered Wisconsin's congressional districts, and abandoned the progressive ideals of Wisconsin. The election results foreshadowed the election of Donald Trump in 2016 helped by his tight win in Wisconsin.

Progressive Wisconsin

One hundred years ago,
“Forward” was the motto –
fighting for human rights,
helping those most in need.

Helping labor unions,
outlawing child labor,
first with social security
for retired workers.

Creating a world-class
university built on
the Wisconsin Idea
to reach the entire state.

Reforming democracy,
supporting women's suffrage,
controlling corporate power,
taxing progressively.

Protecting workers' rights,
setting a minimum wage,
first to assist injured workers,
to support the unemployed.

Historic achievements
after years of struggle,
soon taken for granted –
until they are threatened.

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July, 2012

(from chapbook *Marching*)

On Wisconsin?

When Wisconsin's leaders
attack the rights of women,
neglect the needs of our children,
destroy the power of workers,
ridicule the protesters,
reward the rich and powerful –
where is the moral outrage?

When Wisconsin's leaders
diminish democracy,
restrict government,
trivialize education,
disdain the views of experts,
mock its great university –
where is the moral outrage?

When Wisconsin's leaders
ignore the majority,
tune out the opposition,
respond to money,
pander to power,
impose their will –
where is the moral outrage?

When Wisconsin's leaders
forget the ancient sermon,
blessed are the poor,
blessed are the meek,
blessed are the merciful,
blessed are the peacemakers –
where is the moral outrage?

Where are the leaders
who will rebuild Wisconsin,
our country's progressive leader,
the home of the "Wisconsin Idea,"
the "laboratory for democracy,"
the state of Bob La Follette –
who has the moral outrage?

July, 2015

(from chapbook *Moving*)

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Prose version of "On Wisconsin?" published by The Cap Times online at host.madison.com/ct/opinion/, July 16, 2015.

GOP Actions a Moral Outrage

What has happened to the spirit of On Wisconsin? Our leaders in the capitol attack the rights of women, neglect the needs of our children, and destroy the power of workers. They reward the rich and powerful while ridiculing those who protest. Elected for service through government, they pass legislation to restrict the ability of government to serve and diminish the democratic process. They trivialize education, disdain the views of experts, and mock our great university. Ignoring the majority and tuning out the opposition, they respond to money and pander to power as they impose their will, often behind closed doors.

More than politics, their actions are a moral outrage. Those in power seem to have forgotten the words of the ancient sermon, blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers.

We need new leaders who will rebuild Wisconsin. Leaders who remember that Wisconsin is the home of the "Wisconsin Idea," the "laboratory for democracy," and the progressive state of Bob La Follette. Leaders who feel moral outrage at what they see in state government today.

The following excerpt is from “Created Equal” presented by the author to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Door County on July 2, 2017 (podcast and PDF file at uufdc.org)

Created Equal

This past fall, a candidate, famed for his wealth and his role on reality TV shows, running with nationalistic fervor, and supported by many rural voters, became president of the United States despite losing the popular election by nearly 3 million votes.

We now have an ultra-wealthy president, who embraces “alternative facts” and has criticized or ridiculed the media, the judiciary, the political opposition, women, minorities, immigrants, and sometimes even his own party. Neal Gabler writing in his article “Farewell America” on the Bill Moyers’ website *Moyers & Company* noted that we put in office “a man who has shredded our values, our morals, our compassion, our tolerance, our decency, our sense of common purpose, our very identity.”

Haruki Murakami, a famous Japanese author, in his 1997 novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, has a fictional character describe his feelings about another character in a way that foreshadows the feelings of many people following the November election:

“He knew how to knock his opponent down quickly and effectively with the fewest possible words...you knew that his words lacked consistency...Consistency and an established worldview were excess baggage...in the mass media’s tiny time segments...He needed only to attack,

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to knock his enemy down...no one had questioned his sources or their reliability...I was never able to construct an argument to refute him. It was like boxing with a ghost; your punches just swished through the air. There was nothing solid for them to hit..."

After the November election, these fictional words seem astoundingly prescient as we are pummeled by a torrent of lies and distractions. Joel Whitebook recently wrote in the *New York Times* that many people now have feelings of "disorientation and anxiety." He notes the similarities with Russia where the opposition is kept off-balance by "a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it's indefinable."

It is impossible to win a debate against "a shape-shifting ghost." Rather than engaging in a meaningless debate that cannot be won, we need to make our own statements based on scientific and historic facts as well as our personal experiences...Speaking out will not be easy. Whitebook admits that responding to the cacophony of negativity and chaos that surround us will be an exhausting process...the manic pace of misinformation wears down any opposition.

There will be continuing distractions and efforts to invest the misguided present with an air of normalcy. These are not normal times. There will be calls for unity... We cannot unite until truth, respect, justice, and fairness are restored. Most disturbingly, the opposition will continue to be marginalized despite representing the views of the majority... It will be, as it always has been, a long and difficult job. To succeed, we must work together, be patient, and persevere.

Final thoughts...

The United States of America embraces a wide range of guiding principles. We are “a melting pot” and “a land of opportunity” that believes in “liberty and justice for all” and “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.” These principles grow out of our stories, our traditions, our shared moral values, and our hopes for the future. Some of these phrases are metaphors, many are inspired by history, others are more goals than reality. Our best principles unite rather than divide.

About the author

Larry J. Eriksson is a Wisconsin poet active in the Dickinson Poetry Series at the UU Fellowship of Door County and a member of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. He sees the world as filled with the music of poetry – a cosmic mystery driven by rhythms, rhymes, and riddles. His poems preserve memories, clarify thoughts, explore feelings, or simply have fun with language. In addition to a series of chapbooks, he has published two ebook collections of his poetry, *Word Waves* and *Collected Chapbooks*. You can download these publications for no charge at www.quartersectionpress.com.



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