

IMAGE 1

On the 2016 Presidential Election, American Culture, and the Soul of America.

Thomas Singer, M.D.

*When small men begin to cast big shadows, it means that the sun
is about to set.*

Lin Yutang, writer and translator. (10 October 1895-1976)

What a trip we have been on this past year!!!!—a roller coaster ride into a black hole that has sucked up too much of our time and energy, altering for many of us the space time continuum. As one of my son’s friends’ put it: “Trump has been groping the American psyche for a year and a half.” It will soon be over and I hope that our lives will be less burdened by the gravitational pull of the “dark matter” of this interminable election.

If, as Marshall McLuhan said, “the media is the message,” Donald Trump has taken over the world. Having Trump run for President is like having a terrorist bomb bring down an airplane every day—huge, dire excitement that incites obsessive attention. After dominating daily Google searches for all of 2016, Trump was finally out searched for a few days in late May when Americans frantically Googled “gorilla” because zookeepers at the Cincinnati Zoo shot Harambe, a 17-year-old lowland gorilla when a 4-year-old boy fell into the primate’s enclosure.

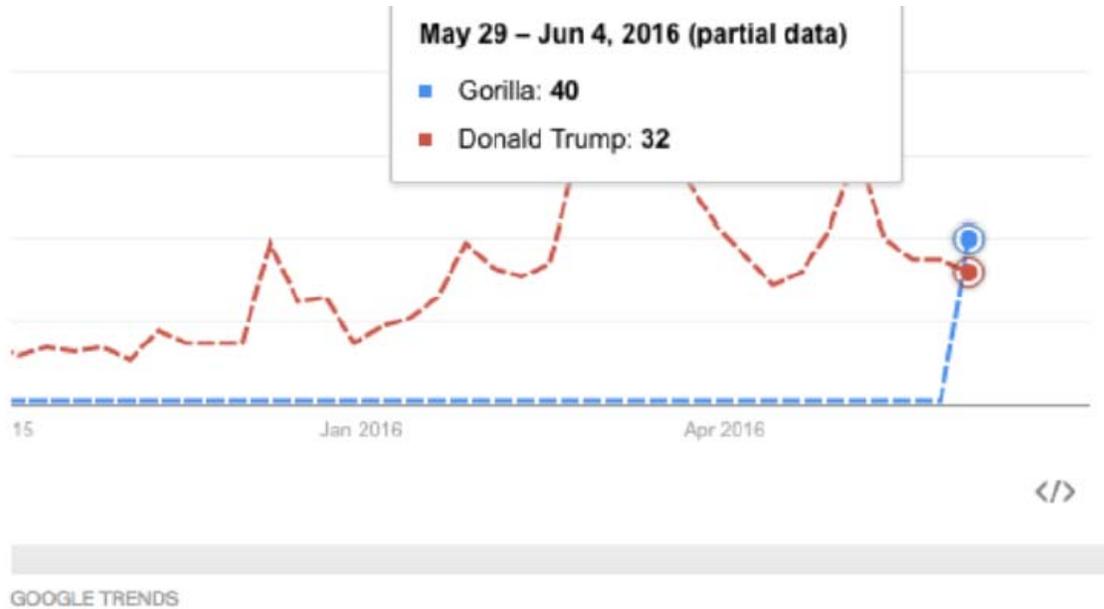


IMAGE 2

Of all the graphs and statistics I have seen during this election cycle, somehow this chart comparing searches for Gorilla vs Trump says more to me about what captures our attention in this country than any other that I have been following. At about that same time in May, one cartoonist put Gorilla and Trump together, perhaps synchronistically.



IMAGE 3

This is the fifth Presidential Conference we have held at the Jung Institute, the first one being in 2000. Previously, I have always urged our speakers to be as objective as possible and not to be too partisan in the hopes that we might find what Joe Henderson called a “psychological attitude” to what the elections were reflecting in the national psyche. As we all know, we live in a progressive bubble in the Bay Area and there happen to be other regions of the country with very different points of view and cultures than those of our own unique hot house.

But you must forgive me this year if I seem to have lost any semblance of wanting to honor both Red and Blue state points of view—although I am very interested in what motivates those who embrace Trump or favor other

conservative points of view. Today I will focus almost exclusively on the Trump phenomenon (as has the media) and try to offer a point of view that reflects a psychological attitude towards what he represents—even though Trump’s staged, squinty eyed “gravitas face” in the debates is not conducive to a “psychological attitude” when a voice inside me screams “Get this Man off the national stage.



IMAGE 4

But I would suggest that all of us in this room are like the famous blind monks who try to describe an elephant that they can't see with the result that each of them ends up describing a different beast. In our conference, I consider

myself one of the blind monks. With that caveat in mind, my first comments concern who we are as a people and the state of our culture as reflected in our Presidential elections.

I wrote a chapter for *A Clear and Present Danger: Narcissism in the Era of Donald Trump* that was rushed to press by the courageous editors of Chiron Publications. I entitled my chapter “Trump and the American Selfie” but in this talk, I want to begin with some words not just about Trump’s narcissism but about America’s narcissism and our narcissistic injuries as a people as revealed in our Presidential elections.

We have become a “Selfie” culture with all that that suggests. Our preoccupations seem to be more and more self-centered and narcissistic in our consumer driven economy. This is certainly true of Trump as his Selfie Stick has had the longest reach in history and has circled the globe, over and over again, to saturate the planet with his image.



IMAGE 5

But, this preoccupation of a celebrity wanting to endlessly project his or her image with which followers can get close to and identify with is generic to our culture and includes Hillary and her supporters as well as Trump and his fans. Here is Hillary, perched on a little stand, waving and smiling to the backs of a group of excited supporters, all of whom are capturing a Selfie with Hillary.



IMAGE 6

To me, there is something profoundly unnerving about the Selfie invasion of our culture—as if we are all turning into the very Zombies that haunt our collective imagination. The “Selfie” is a weird symbol of who we have become. It is as if we don’t exist unless we have instantaneous images or reflections of ourselves in great places with important people that we can simultaneously post all over the internet. Perhaps, it makes us and the event seem more real and

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important. This leads me to the work of Christopher Hedges, a harsh critic of our contemporary culture with whom I find myself in sad agreement about who we have become as a people and as a nation.

In *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* Hedges writes

“We are a culture that has been denied, or has passively given up, the linguistic and intellectual tools to cope with complexity, to separate illusion from reality. We have traded the printed word for the gleaming image. Public rhetoric is designed to be comprehensible to a ten-year-old child with a sixth grade reading level. Most of us speak at this level, are entertained and think at this level... When a nation becomes unmoored from reality, it retreats into a world of magic. Facts are accepted or discarded according to the dictates of preordained cosmology. The search for truth becomes irrelevant. Our national discourse is dominated by manufactured events, from celebrity gossip to staged showcasing of politicians to elaborate entertainment and athletic spectacles. All are sold to us through the detailed personal narratives of those we watch. Pseudo events, dramatic productions orchestrated by publicists, political machines, television, Hollywood, or advertisers... have the capacity to appear real, even though we know they are staged. They are effective because they can evoke a powerful emotional response which overshadows reality and replaces it with a fictional narrative that often becomes accepted as truth.”

(Hedges, C. (2009). *Empire of illusion: The end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle*. New York: Nation Books.pp. 44, 50)

If our unwillingness and inability to sort out illusion from reality is not

enough in itself, it gets further hopelessly entangled with our cult of celebrity.

Again, from Hedges:

“Celebrity culture plunges us into a moral void. No one has any worth beyond his or her appearance, usefulness, or ability to succeed. The highest achievements in a celebrity culture are wealth, sexual conquest, and fame. It does not matter how these are obtained. These values leave us chasing vapors. They urge us toward a life of narcissistic self-absorption. They tell us that existence is to be centered on the practices and desires of the self (not our Jungian capital “Self”) rather than the common good. The ability to lie and manipulate others is held up as the highest good. The cult of self interest dominates our cultural landscape. This cult has within it the classic traits of the psychopaths: superficial charm, grandiosity, and self-importance; a need for constant stimulation, a penchant for lying, deception and manipulation, and the inability to feel remorse or guilt. It is the misguided belief that personal style and personal advancements, mistaken for individualism, are the same as democratic equality. We have a right, in the cult of the self, to get whatever we desire. We can do anything, even belittle and destroy those around us, including our friends, to make money, to be happy, and to become famous. Once fame and wealth are achieved, they become their own justification, their own morality. How one gets there is irrelevant. Once you get there, those questions are no longer asked.” (Hedges, C. (2009). *Empire of illusion: The end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle*. New York: Nation Books.pp. 32–33)

Hedges is describing a generic kind of celebrity—whether politician, businessman, actor, or athlete (perhaps even psychoanalyst??). And generic celebrity is at the heart of our social, political, and cultural life. Hedges wrote this

in 2009, well before Donald Trump's 2016 campaign for the Presidency and he is describing a dominant cultural attitude or even cultural complex. Hedge's point of view is decidedly negative and one-sided, but it probably describes more accurately what this election has been about than anything else I have come across.

Keeping in mind Hedges' focus on our preference for illusion over reality and our fascination with celebrity, I want to turn back to the question of how Trump has become an irresistible magnet sucking up most of the air in our cultural psyche, both drawing people to him or repelling them from him with such ferocious attraction or repulsion. We must ask ourselves: Is Trump the end product of our culture of narcissism? Is he what we get and perhaps even deserve because he epitomizes the god or gods that we currently worship in our mindless, materialistic, consumerist, hyper-indulged cult of around-the-clock stimulation and entertainment? Again, listen to Hedges:

An image-based culture communicates through narratives, pictures, and pseudo-drama. Scandalous affairs, hurricanes, untimely deaths, train wrecks—these events play well on computer screens and television. International diplomacy, labor union negotiations, and convoluted bailout packages do not yield exciting personal narratives or stimulating images. A governor who patronizes call girls becomes a huge news story. A politician who proposes serious regulatory reform advocating curbing wasteful spending is boring. In an age of images and entertainment, in an age of instant emotional gratification, we neither seek nor want honesty or reality. Reality is complicated. Reality is boring. We are incapable or unwilling to handle its confusion. We ask to be indulged and comforted by clichés, stereotypes, and inspirational

messages that tell us we can be whoever we seek to be, that we live in the greatest country on earth, that we are endowed with superior moral and physical qualities, and that our future will always be glorious and prosperous, either because of our own attributes or our national character or because we are blessed by God. The ability to amplify lies, to repeat them and have surrogates repeat them in endless loops of news cycles, gives lies and mythical narratives the aura of uncontested truth. We become trapped in the linguistic prison of incessant repetition. We are fed words and phrases like “war on terror” or “pro-life” or “change”, and within these narrow parameters, all complex thought, ambiguity, and self-criticism vanish.

(Hedges, C. (2009). *Empire of illusion: The end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle*. New York: Nation Books.p. 49)

Again: why Trump? It seems clear that Trump’s narcissism and his attacks on political correctness dovetail with deep needs in a significant portion of the American population to enhance their own dwindling sense of their place in the world and of America’s place in the world. In that sense, the focus truly shifts from Trump as a single individual to the society in which he has thrived. Trump’s peculiar brand of narcissism is a perfect compensatory mirror for the narcissistic needs and injuries of those who support him. Or, stated in another way, there is a good fit between Trump’s personal narcissism and the narcissism of our culture and the wounded collective Self of many Americans. With this general formulation in mind, I want to analyze how Trump’s candidacy speaks to three highly intertwined parts of a cultural complex in the group psyche of many Americans. This group psyche and its complexes are both a shared experience

among the members of a group and lives inside each member of the group.

- 1. To a woundedness at the core of the American group Self.**
- 2. To the defenses mobilized in the groups that feel wounded who wish to protect themselves and the country against further injury to the shared group Self.**
- 3. To the promise or hope of a cure for the wound.**

1. Wound to the American Group Self

I would first like to address what I perceive as a wound at the core of the American group Self/spirit that is deeply felt by many, especially by those who have neither benefited from nor participated in the relative wellbeing of our nation's prosperity and by others who are relatively well off but keenly aware that our system of government and our way of life are threatened at the core of our collective being. Here is a working definition of the group Self or spirit that I put forth in an earlier paper:

.... the group spirit is akin to what we Jungians might call the Self of the group. The group spirit is the ineffable core beliefs or sense of identity that bind people together. Sports teams have a group spirit and their fans often magically participate in it. Nation states have a group spirit and their citizens often magically and unconsciously participate in it—particularly in times of crisis. Religious faiths have a group spirit, often symbolized by a part human/part divine being. Ethnic groups, gender groups, and racial

groups all have a group spirit that is frequently felt and identified with in a myriad of ways. The group spirit can be symbolized by animals, humans, inanimate objects and, in its most ineffable form, the refusal to symbolize it in imagery at all. The group spirit has many different elements that have come together in a seamless, often wordless and even imageless, non-material whole that is known to its members through a sense of belonging, shared essential beliefs, core historical experiences of loss and revelation, deepest yearnings, and ideals. One can begin to circle around the nature of a group's spirit by asking questions such as:

What is most sacred to the group?

What binds the group's members together?

Singer, T. 2006b. Unconscious forces shaping international conflicts: Archetypal defenses of the group spirit from revolutionary America to confrontation in the Middle East. *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, 25(4), 6–28.



IMAGE 7

The group Self is best expressed through a symbolic image, which, in today's United States, often is more like a "brand" that its creators hope will become a "symbol": Because a group's Self has so many pieces, many of which are contradictory, only an authentic symbol has a numinous quality that can contain all the tensions and conflicts. An authentic symbolic image can make a whole of the disparate parts.



IMAGE 8

Many in our country—on the left, right, and in the center—feel the country is in danger and may be beyond hope of being repaired or getting back on the right course. Profoundly divided, our group spirit at this stage in our history is less secure than it has been for some time. This nervousness about our essential well-being is deeply felt both by the progressive left and by the conservative right—those who feel alienated and angered by the current governing leaders

whom they oppose and see as destroying the country, whether the archenemy be Mitch McConnell of the Republicans or Barack Obama of the Democrats. On the right, the threat of terrorism (Muslims), the threat of immigrants (Mexicans), the threat of the global economy (China and international trade agreements), or the threat of our existing governing bodies and leaders (Congress) are seen as leading us to the brink. On the left, the threats to a sense of well-being and security in our national group Self come as the result of the growing disparity in the distribution of wealth and income; the mistreatment of minorities whether those of different races, colors, ethnicities, sexual identities or genders; our power relationships to other countries around the world; and, of course the treatment of the environment itself.

I postulate that these threats are amplified on all sides by an even deeper, less conscious threat that I call *extinction anxiety*. Extinction anxiety exists both in the personal and group psyche and, at this time in our country, is based on the fear of the loss of white America as some have idealized it, the loss of America's place in the world as we have known it, and ultimately the destruction of the environment and the world itself. One might think of extinction anxiety as the cultural psyche's equivalent of the anxiety about death in the individual. I believe that this extinction anxiety is like a psychic radioactive background that is not just an American phenomenon but dwells in the psychic depths throughout our global society and that it fuels the concerns of people around the world as well as our more particular American concerns—whether we favor Clinton or Trump or neither. This extinction anxiety belongs to all of us in the world—to the collective psyche.

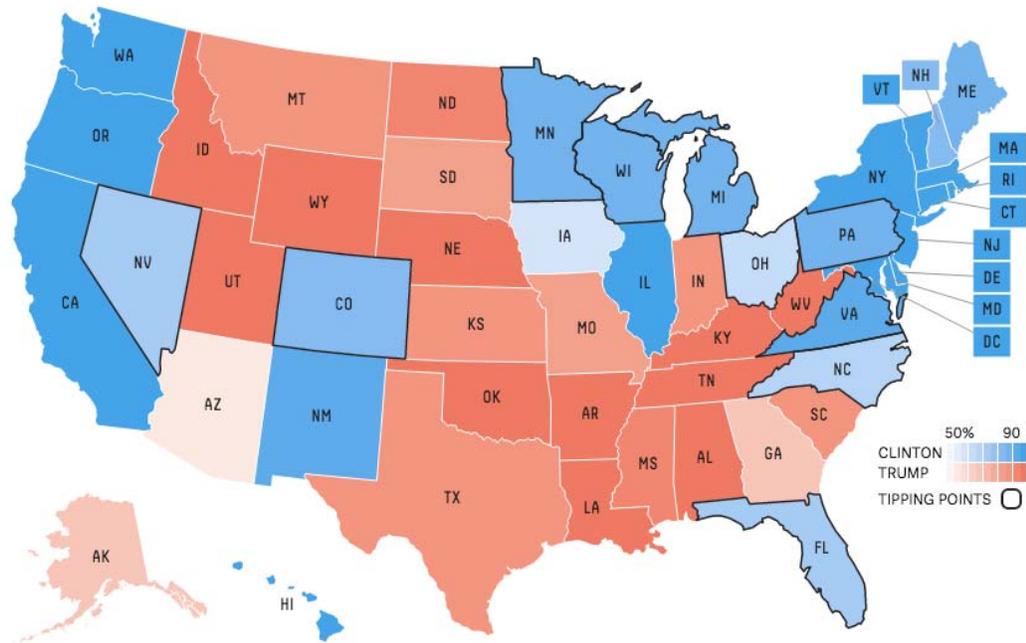


IMAGE 9

One way we might begin to bridge the huge gap between ourselves and those living in the large block of so called Red states in the middle and southern regions of the country or, put another way, one way we might find the capacity for empathy and even a psychological attitude for those who favor Trump is through the pain of our own narcissistic injuries at the level of the Group Self in which our highest ideals for a nation of justice, equality, equal opportunity and freedom have been tarnished. At the level of the Group Self or Spirit of America as it lives inside each of us, we have all been injured and can most easily blame one another for the injury that we feel. Listen carefully to how Joseph Epstein describes the injury to the group Self/spirit of one woman attracted to Trump, how the United States looks to her as mirrored through the nightly television news:

“I had a hint of what might be behind the support for Trump a few

weeks ago when, on one of the major network news shows, I watched a reporter ask a woman at a Trump rally why she was supporting him. A thoroughly respectable-seeming middle-class woman, she replied without hesitation: “I want my country back.” This woman is easily imagined clicking through TV news channels or websites and encountering this montage: Black Lives Matters protesters bullying the latest object of their ire; a lesbian couple kissing at their wedding ceremony; a mother in Chicago weeping over the death of her young daughter, struck by an errant bullet from a gang shootout; a panel earnestly discussing the need for men who identify as women to have access to the public lavatories of their choosing; college students, showing the results of their enfeebling education, railing about imagined psychic injuries caused by their professors or fellow students. I don’t believe that this woman is a racist, or that she yearns for immigrants, gays and other minorities to be suppressed, or even that she truly expects to turn back the clock on social change in the U.S. What she wants is precisely what she says: her country back. What the woman who said she wants her country back really meant was that she couldn’t any longer bear to watch the United States on the descent, hostage to progressivist ideas that bring neither contentment nor satisfaction but instead foster a state of perpetual protest and agitation, anger and tumult. So great is the frustration of Americans who do not believe in these progressivist ideas, who see them as ultimately tearing the country apart, that they are ready to turn, in their near hopelessness, to a man of Donald Trump’s patently low quality.

Epstein, J. (2016, June 10). Why Trumpkins want their country back. Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-trumpkins-wanttheir-country-back-1465596987>

The Self or group spirit of America is built on more than 300 years of progress, success, achievement, resourcefulness, and ingenuity, accompanied by

almost endless opportunity and good fortune—unless you happen to be black or any other alienated minority. We love and believe in our heroic potential, our freedom and independence, our worship of height and speed, youth, newness, technology, our optimism, and eternal innocence. We have enjoyed the profound resilience of the American spirit, which has shown itself repeatedly through very difficult historical trials, including our Civil War, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, the 9/11 attacks, the Iraq War, the financial collapse in 2008, and other major crises. As a country, we have been blessed in our capacity to transcend loss, failure, and the threat of defeat in the face of crisis time and again, and this has contributed to a positive vision of ourselves that has been fundamentally solid at the core for a long time. Of course, that Self-image is subject to inflation, arrogance, and grandiosity in our belief in our own exceptionalism and our blindness to our causing grave injury to other peoples at home and abroad. Again, this Self-image exists at the level of the group psyche. It is quite possible that Trump’s personal inflation, arrogance, and grandiosity represents for about 40% of the voting population a compensatory antidote in our group psyche to a Self-image beginning to suffer severe self-doubt about our ability to navigate a highly uncertain future successfully and the nostalgic longing perfectly articulated in the phrase: “I want my country back.”

2. Archetypal Defenses of the Group Self

Second are the defenses mobilized by those feeling this woundedness who wish to protect themselves and their country against further injury to the shared group spirit. A significant number of people in our society feel cut off from what

they believe to be their inherited, natural birthright as American citizens. Those for whom our cherished American group spirit seems endangered are ready to defend themselves—whether the perceived attack is coming from within or outside the country. Although they would not use this language, they are suffering a wound at the level of the group spirit or Self, even as they are also suffering individually. We can think of this as a narcissistic injury at the level of our group Self. I suggest that Trump has somehow intuited that injury and is playing to it, both as a carrier of the renewal of the group spirit and as a defender against those who would do further harm to it—be it terrorists, immigrants, Washingtonian political insiders, the established Republican Party, Obama, and perhaps above all else right now, Hillary Clinton and the Democrats who deserve to be put in jail for violating the law and betraying the country. Three aspects of the current manifestation of archetypal defenses of the group spirit are as follows:

a. Trump’s attack on political correctness

Trump’s particular political genius in this election cycle has been to launch his campaign with an attack on political correctness, often boiled down to the phrase: “Get em outta here!” Trump’s willingness time and again to be politically incorrect has tapped into the shadowy feelings that many have about all the things we are supposed to be compassionate about—ethnic differences, racial differences, color differences, gender differences, religious differences.



IMAGE 10

Trump’s strategy has been shrewd: He seems to have sensed that “political correctness” could be the trigger word or phrase that could unleash potent levels of shadow energies that have been accumulating in the cultural unconscious of the group psyche for some time. He rode a huge wave of pent-up resentment, racism, misogyny and hatred unleashed by his attacks on political correctness long enough to crush his Republican opponents and become the Republican nominee for president of the United States. The notion of a trigger word activating a complex goes back to Jung’s early word association tests in which certain words detonated powerful emotions contained within personal complexes—such as the mother or father complex. Cultural complexes are also frequently triggered by a collective word association process that takes on a life of its own in the psyche of the group and which can be manipulated by skillful politicians who use specific trigger words to activate the primitive emotions that fuel cultural complexes. Trump is at his best when he is awful.

Trump’s willingness to be politically incorrect has become a sign of his “truth-telling” to many. Trump embodies the truth of the shadow side of “political correctness” and that seems to be the primary truth that his core followers care about. Once Trump spoke to their emotional truth, the Trump faithful no longer cared whether he told other truths. Cultural complexes don’t need or rely on facts to validate their particular perspective on the world. If it feels right, it must be so. In fact, it is a characteristic of cultural complexes that facts are just about the first thing to go when an individual or group becomes possessed by a complex. A group caught up in a cultural complex has highly selective memory—if any historical memory at all—and only chooses those historical and contemporary facts that validate their pre-existing opinion. In a wild inversion from Trump’s seemingly frequent misrepresentation of the truth, people have apparently come to believe that Trump is “telling it like it is” in his attacks on the inept Washington politicians who know nothing about conducting business. As infuriating as it is that facts don’t seem to make any difference in Trump’s self-presentation (his aides have actually said that we live in a “post-factual” world and that it is “elitist” to insist on facts), it would be a huge mistake to underestimate how successfully he has mobilized the crude underbelly of long-standing American suspicions of people who are different from themselves. What a relief for so many to hear a politician speak their unspoken resentments and express their rage, which they could previously only mutter privately. Trump apparently tapped into the dirty little (or not so little) secret of our loathing of various minorities (even though we may all be minorities now) and especially of recent immigrants. This kind of shadow energy is much more likely to be close to

the surface of consciousness and available for exploitation in a group of people who previously saw themselves as having a solid place in American society and who now find themselves marginalized and drifting downward—both socially and economically—or in a group who never had a chance of making progress toward the American dream. These are often the people who see the recent immigrants to this country as stealing the American dream from them.

b. Unholy marriage of shadow, archetypal defenses of the group Self, and the group Self

What makes Trump’s unleashing of the shadow in the American psyche around “political correctness” even more dangerous is that these energies become linked or even identical with what I call archetypal defenses of the group spirit. Here is how I have defined “archetypal defenses of the group spirit”:

“This phrase is a mouthful, but its purpose is to offer a precise psychological description of a level of collective emotional life that is deeply responsive to threat—whether the threat is real or simply perceived as real. When this part of the collective psyche is activated, the most primitive psychological forces come alive for the purpose of defending the group and its collective spirit or Self. I capitalize Self because I want to make it clear that it is not just the persona or ego identity of the group that is under attack but something at an even deeper level of the collective psyche which one might think of as the spiritual home or god of the group. The tendency to fall into the grips of an identification with an archetypal defense of the group spirit is universal, and almost every one of us has experienced such a possession at some time in our lives— at

least in one if not many of the primary groups to which we belong simultaneously. The tribal spirit of the clan or of the nation often lies dormant or in the background, but when it is threatened, the defenses mobilized to protect it are ferocious and impersonal. The mobilization of such potent, archaic defenses is fueled by raw collective emotion and rather simplistic, formulaic ideas and/or beliefs. One can think of the more virulent cultural complexes as being fed by a vast underground pool of the collective emotional life. Archetypal defenses of the group spirit are animated by the release of these heightened emotions of groups in distress.... Once a certain level of emotional intensity is achieved in the psyche of the group, archetypal defenses of the group spirit come to the forefront and begin to determine and even dictate how the group will think, feel, react, and behave. These activated archetypal defenses of the group spirit find concrete expression in forms as varied as the unrest of divided populations over the legal status of foreign immigrants in countries around the world, the threatened development of nuclear weapons by nation states such as Iran or [North] Korea, the deployment of suicide bombers by terrorist groups, or the launching of massive military expeditions by world powers.

And, these same kinds of archetypal defenses come alive in all sorts of skirmishes between diverse groups of people, who are not necessarily armed with explosive devices but perceive themselves in a threatened or disadvantaged position in which their most sacred values are in jeopardy—Gays, Blacks, Women, White men, the Christian Right in the United States, Jews around the world, the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Middle East. The list of groups threatened at the core of their being or at the level of the group Self seems endless.

Singer, T. 2006b. Unconscious forces shaping international conflicts: Archetypal defenses of the group spirit from revolutionary

America to confrontation in the Middle East. The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal, 25(4), 6–28.

In this regard, look at the maps prepared by Nate Silver based on how the Red/Blue map of the states would divide if only the votes of men were counted or if only the votes of women were counted. Men alone give Trump an 11% edge in the polls and the red/blue divide of the states would look like this:

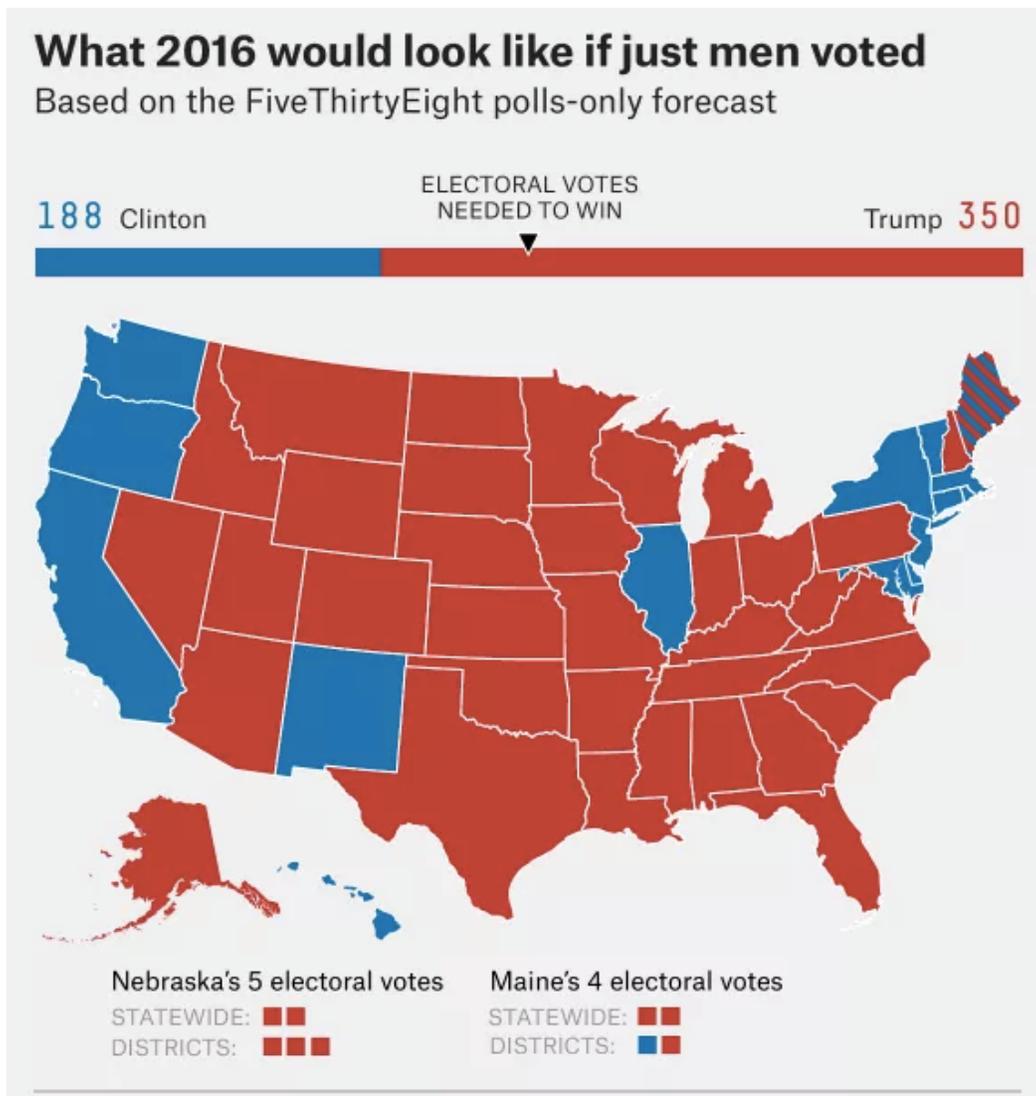


IMAGE 11

Women alone give Clinton a 33% edge in the polls and the Red/Blue divide of the states would shift significantly

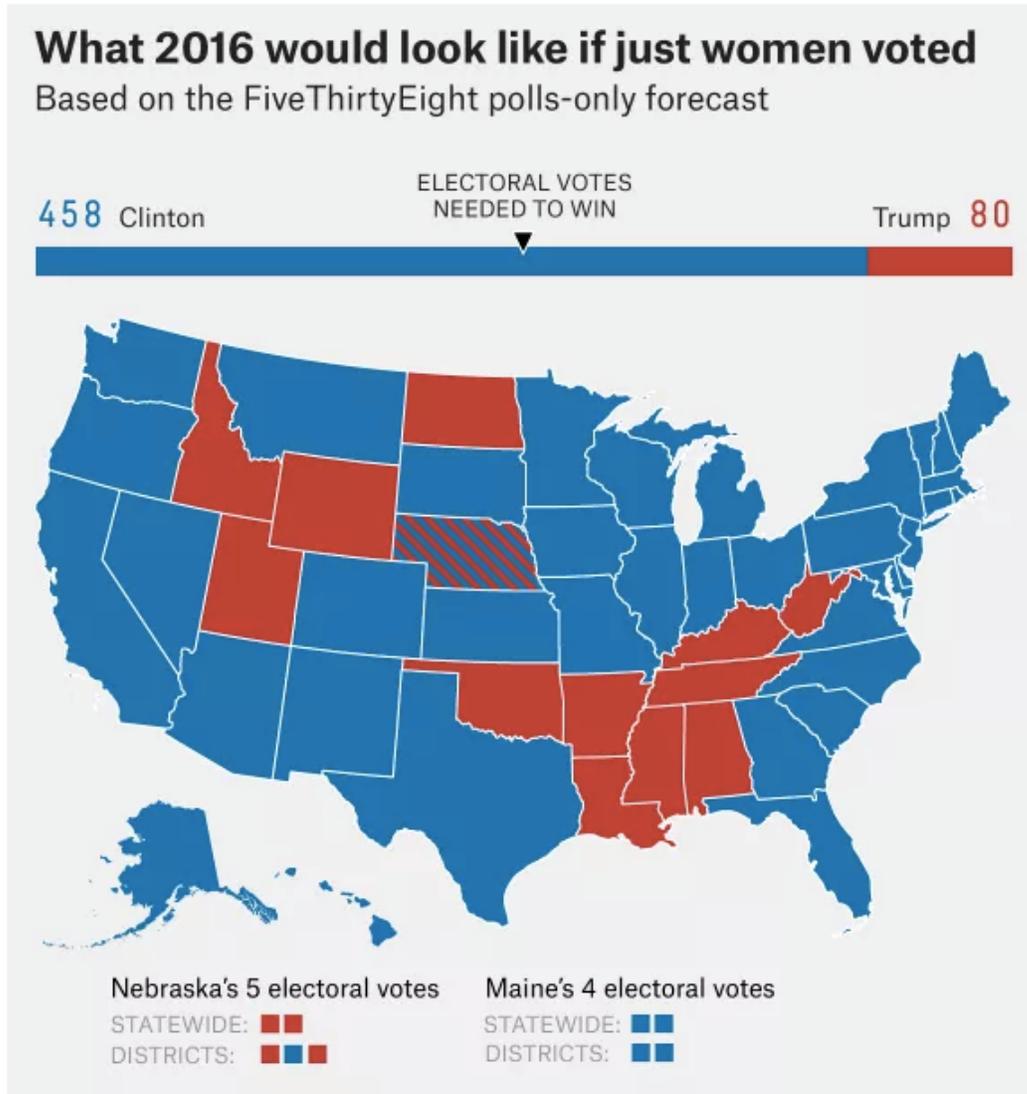


IMAGE 12

From the point of view of the group psyche, Trump has aligned his attack on political correctness with the archetypal defenses of the group spirit. That is why I stress his two foundational mantras: “Get ‘em outta here!” and “Make America Great Again!”—in other words, “Rid the country of all elements that

threaten our sense of Self, and “Make the country white and powerful and rich again.” The first statement speaks for the shadow/ archetypal defense of the group spirit, and the second statement speaks for the repair to group Self. This constellation of group energies/structures puts the shadow very close to the Self, very close to what the group values most about itself and how it protects itself. This gives further license in the unconscious of the group to ride and act out these aggressive, hateful, and violent forces in the collective psyche. What makes Trump’s narcissism so dangerous in its mix of shadow (his attacks on all sorts of groups of people) and Self elements (his self-aggrandizing, inflated sense of himself) is that it plays to the unholy marriage of Self and shadow elements in the collective psyche. Trump’s example gives permission for shadowy thoughts, feelings, and actions to be discharged on behalf of the Self. I think this underlying group dynamic explains the comparison of Trump to Hitler. Evoking an archaic image of the German Self, Hitler mobilized the most shadowy forces in modern history in the so-called service of that Self-image, which centered on the supremacy of the Aryan race—first the Brownshirts, then the Gestapo, SS, and other forces of the Third Reich, including its highly efficient bureaucracy. Trump seems to be toying with the collective shadow, apparently encouraging its acting out in the name of the Self. From the point of view of analytical psychology, when the shadow, the archetypal defenses of the group spirit, and the group Self in any group get so closely aligned, there is great danger of violence, tyranny, and absolutism.

c. Curing the Wounded Self of America: Trump's Selfie and America's Selfie

The third and final component of this intertwined triad of forces in the group psyche is Trump's implicit promise of providing a cure for the wound at the level of the group Self. This is where Trump's narcissism is most prominent and most dangerous. I believe there is an unconscious equation between Trump's inflated sense of himself and the cure for the American group Self that many believe he promises. This equation can be most simply stated as the following: "I am the Greatness to which America may once again aspire. By identifying with how great I am, you can rekindle your wounded American dream and make yourself and America great again." Or even more bluntly, "I have achieved the American dream; I am the American dream; I am the incarnation of the Self that the country aspires to." This, of course, is a massive inflation. Trump identifies his personal being with the Self of America, and it is his source of demagogic appeal to authoritarians and others. He is encouraging those Americans who have lost a foothold in the American dream to place their trust in him as a mirror of their own potential—a potential that he personally has already achieved. If one is able to place themselves in that mindset, one can get a glimpse of Trump's magnetic appeal. Trump himself said many years ago:

"I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of

exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion.

Fisher, M., & Hobson, W. (2016, May 13). Trump masqueraded as publicist to brag about himself. Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/donald-trump-alter-ego-barron/2016/05/12/02ac99ec-16fe-11e6-aa55-670cabef46e0_story.html?hpid=hp_rhp-top-table-main_noname%3Ahomepage%2Fstory

Trump's apparent money, power, fame, and his willingness to shoot from the hip seem to fit with the frustrated yearnings of many Americans. He has managed to catch the projection of a powerful and successful person who, by virtue of his alleged business acumen and ability to negotiate, is able to make things happen for his own betterment—rarely for the betterment of others despite his claims of giving generously to charities and creating untold jobs.

Trump presents himself as the embodiment of a form of the American Dream that, in his singular greatness and achievement, he can personally restore to America's wounded Self-image and to those Americans who have failed to achieve their dreams of greatness. It is almost as if Trump is saying, "My grandiosity is the greatness of America. We can make America great again by following me and then, you, too, can be like me: aggressive, successful, big, powerful, a winner" This has tremendous appeal for many, especially those who, at some level, experience themselves as losers. This is the narcissism of Trump joining with the injured narcissism of those Americans who have seen their chances for well-being and security rapidly slipping away. In that sense, Trump is not only speaking for the shadow; he is also speaking for the Self of America—or,

at least his version of it. His version is the materialistic power version of the American dream—of the big man who has made himself rich and, through his wealth and strength of personality, powerful. He is free to speak his own mind and to pursue, without limits, his own self-aggrandizing goals.

The negative aspects of Trump’s narcissism strike those who have been repelled rather than attracted by him as a symbolic mirror of everything negative about America’s culture of narcissism. Just as some think that Trump is the embodiment of everything that has made America great in the past and will make us great again, some see Trump as the very embodiment of everything awful that we have become as a nation. Undoubtedly, this is also what many in the rest of the world see as the worst of who we have become. In this view, we can see the shadow of the American “selfie” (not just Trump’s) as:

1. A self-promoting brand
2. Arrogant bullies in our conduct of business and other relations
3. Very limited in our capacity for self-reflection
4. Filled with hubris and a lack of humility
5. Self-absorbed with little sensitivity for the needs of others
6. Possessed by greed and consumerism
7. So entitled in our good fortune that we have come to believe this is our natural due

These seven features are core characteristics of the American cultural complex in which the shadow, archetypal defenses of the American Spirit, and the American Self get all mixed up with each other in the most noxious stew and

we find ourselves betraying that very Self or spirit on which the nation and its constitution were founded. And how dreadful to think that Trump's narcissism is a perfect mirror and archetypal embodiment of our national narcissism. And what if it is also a mirror of our own shadowy, personal narcissism to boot?

Ultimately, I believe that the Trump phenomenon is less about Trump than it is about us—about who we are as a people. From this perspective, the elephant in the room turns out to be “We the People of the United States.” How terrifying to think that our politics and our lives today have gotten horribly confused with reality TV, social media, computer and cell phone technology, and their infinite capacity to turn reality into illusion, Self into narcissism. And here is a “punch line.” Everything I have said about Trump could be reflected back to me by a Hillary hater and said about Hillary and Bill Clinton. Just as personal complexes obliterate one's ability to be objective when one is caught in a negative personal complex, so too a cultural complex obscures any semblance of objectivity because everything gets reflected through the complex's point of view which is affect laden, repetitious, autonomous, and stereotypically simplistic in its thinking. The complex sees only its own point of view which it endlessly reinforces with “facts” that validate its own memory and narrative. When two cultural complexes lock horns, there is no possibility of dialogue or discourse because the complexes are just having it out. I would argue that this is where we are in our current political environment. A psychological attitude would permit seeing the warring cultural complexes for what they are and permit a “third” point of view that can step outside the complexes and begin a real dialogue. As long as an individual or a group is locked in a cultural complex, this is simply impossible.

Soul in America: Trump as A Perverted Echo of Walt Whitman

“Do I Contradict Myself?”

As I contemplate how Trump’s narcissism plays to the injured narcissism of America’s group Self, Walt Whitman, the ultimate bard of the American soul comes to mind, as some of Whitman’s words have a strange, disorienting resonance with how Trump presents himself. Several pundits have played with the notion of Donald Trump being some sort of twisted mirror image of Walt Whitman. For instance, Zenpundit sardonically points to the similarity between how Trump behaves and what Whitman says about himself in the lines:

“Do I contradict myself?
Very well then, I contradict myself.
I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Trump is so large and powerful that he doesn’t have to be predictable. He can change his mind if he wants.

“Song of Myself”

In “Song of Myself,” one of Whitman’s most famous poems from *Leaves of Grass*, the poet gets as close to evoking the soul/Self of America as any American has in his visionary lines:

“I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

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My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
 Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their
 parents the same,
 I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
 Hoping to cease not till death."
 (Section 1)

As Wikipedia notes, Whitman emphasizes an all-powerful "I" in the poem which serves as narrator, who should not be limited to or confused with the person of the historical Walt Whitman. The persona described has transcended the conventional boundaries of self: 'I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed babe ... and am not contained between my hat and boots' (section 7)." Wikipedia Contributors, 2016).

It is easy to imagine Trump also saying "I celebrate myself. I sing myself." Everything Trump says and does seems to be a celebration of himself. We know, intuitively, that Trump's "song of myself" is not the same one that Whitman sings. Trump sings a self-congratulatory song; Whitman sings a Self-affirming song. One song is of and for the whole nation; the other song centers on the triumph of Trump himself and for all those individuals who would appropriate his claim to superiority for themselves.

"I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of Soul"

In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman proclaims himself the bard of the American soul when he writes: "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" (Section 21). Whitman likens the body and soul of America to a blade of grass

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whose very existence mirrors the “journey work of the stars” in its immortality. Trump claims himself to be the body and soul of America in the Trump Casinos, the Trump Towers, Trump University, and even Trump steaks—shoddy pretenders to what is best and most soulful in America.

**“I Sound My Barbaric Yawp Over the Roofs
of the World”**

Whitman sings his mystical, transcendent vision of America as he compares himself to the spotted hawk who soars above the sacred land:

“The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains
of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”

(Section 52)

Whitman, W. (1973). *Song of myself. Leaves of grass*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Trump echoes these sentiments as he proudly presents himself to the world as “untranslatable.” He, too, shouts his own “barbaric yawp” over the roofs of the world. In Whitman’s imagination, the essence of the American soul is neither civilized nor verbal. The “barbaric yawp” is the fierce “voice” of a soul that is unrestrained and exulting in its self-expression. It gives expression to a primitive enthusiasm in the form of a non-verbal cry from the essential nature of a living being. Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* and Bob Dylan’s voice, once described as “a coyote caught in barbed wire,” can be considered grandchildren of Whitman’s

“barbaric yawp” of the American soul. So, too, is Jimi Hendrix’s rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner.”

Steven Herrmann, a Jungian with a deep, scholarly interest in Whitman, wrote to me:

“Whitman’s “yawp” is a conscious cry from the Soul of America to make the barbarian in American political democracy conscious! The “barbaric yawp” is Whitman’s call from the depths of the American Soul to awaken the possibility of hope in a brighter future for American democracy....The aim of Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” was to sound a new heroic message of “Happiness,” Hope, and “Nativity” over the roofs of the world, to sound a primal cry which must remain essentially “unsaid” because it rests at the core of the American soul and cannot be found in “any dictionary, utterance, symbol” (Leaves, Section 50). The “barbaric yawp” is a metaphorical utterance for something “untranslatable” from the depths of the American Soul for the emergence of man as a spiritual human being in whom the aims of liberty and equality have been fully realized and in whom the opposites of love and violence, friendship and war, have been unified at a higher political field of order than anything we have formerly seen in America. His “yawp” is an affect state, a spiritual cry of “Joy” and “Happiness” prior to the emergence of language.

(Steven Herrmann, personal communication, January, 2007)”

Trump’s “barbaric yawp” (“Get ‘em outta here!”) may sound tinny in comparison to those who came before him, such as Whitman, Ginsburg, Dylan, Hendrix, and many others who have tapped into a primal energy that is essentially American. At great risk, however, one could too quickly discount the

fact that Trump also has his own instinct for a primal source of American “barbaric” enthusiasm.

I cannot help but wonder if Donald Trump and his inarticulate utterances, which make so many of us cringe, have not been heard by many in America as a modern version of Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” from our country’s “body and soul.” However reluctantly, we have to accept the fact that Trump may speak directly to the American soul of many in our country, just as our more progressive sensibilities can link Barack Obama’s measured oratory to the American soul. Who are we to suppose we know who speaks for the American soul? Who has a legitimate claim on the American soul anyway? Is it possible that Donald Trump has found in his crude utterances a resonance with the American soul that says more to many Americans’ identities and yearnings than many of us can imagine?

Comparing Trump to Whitman may seem sacrilegious to the memory of the great American poet. But there is a logic to such a comparison as Trump is the shadow or dark mirror to the best things in America, sung so eloquently by Whitman. Trump’s “song of myself” is truly a “song of myself.” Whitman sings of what is best in us and Trump’s horrific bluster displays what is worst in us. What is sacred in Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” becomes profane in Trump’s perverted echo of that yawp.

I leave the reader with a question, given that I believe both Whitman and Trump identify themselves with the soul or Self of America. What is the difference between Whitman’s “I celebrate myself, I sing myself” and Trump’s version of that same song in “Make America Great Again”? It is worth grappling

with this question as a way of differentiating that kind of narcissism in which the ego gets inflated and identifies with the Self and its archetypal defenses versus that kind of rare but blessed, overflowing exuberance, integrity, and love in which the ego is connected to but not identified with the Self. What is real about Trump's selfie is the unexpurgated expression of both his own and America's grandiose, narcissistic, misogynistic, racist, materialistic, shadowy abuse of power. What is authentic about Whitman's barbaric yawp as a Self-portrait of America is its life affirming, primitive vitality, which is not to be confused with Trump's cheesy Bronx cheer as an American selfie.

And let's give Walt Whitman the last word about the Soul of America in his haunting and challenging poem:

LONG, TOO LONG AMERICA.

LONG, too long America,
Traveling roads all even and peaceful you learn'd from joys and
prosperity only,
But now, ah now, to learn from crises of anguish, advancing, grap-
pling with direst fate and recoiling not,
And now to conceive and show to the world what your children
en-masse really are,
(For who except myself has yet conceiv'd what your children
en-masse really are?)

Walt Whitman, 1861 from *Drum-Taps*

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