

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN PARIS, May 28, 2019

It's great to be back in the land of the eternal "malaise." I felt right at home when my cab driver at CDG told me that my GPS was **wrong** to say the trip to the 7th would take an hour. *More like an hour-and-a-half*, he grunted, *or two*. Nothing is ever quite so bad in France that it may not get worse.

There is a lot to be said for a country that's seen it all. It becomes generous, offering up its beautiful Parisian bridges as the backdrop for Chinese marital bliss, allowing New World upstarts to produce their one-dimensional vintages in the knowledge that the **only** wine worth drinking is French, even permitting "*le brainstorming*" to enter the lexicon. To be a Francophile is a life sentence. It's a condition we recognize in each other. It's not exactly a badge of honor, not a burden either, but a slightly illicit gift of ever renewed pleasures.

How I love French realism, the shrug and the "*Bof*" that say this too will pass, even the Orange Man in the White House. It is not only in matters of the heart that the French are shockproof.

Speaking of the heart, as you have already intimated, I cannot hide my love for *la douce France*. Thank you Berna, Lee and Connie for offering me an excuse to return. I've heard it said there were European Parliament elections, but AUP, like friendship, feels *more important* than that. It is an institution that constitutes a transatlantic bridge and global outreach and, as such, a rebuke to that slogan of pure Fascist pedigree, *America First*.

President Trump likes such slogans: *Enemies of the people* is another. I assure you that America's free press will not be cowed by this assault.

I am fast approaching Paul McCartney's will-you-still-need-me, will-you-still-feed me age: that was **old** back in the 1960's. You know what, 64 is still *not young*. Memories accumulate, time accelerates, the body bridles, and one's gaze turns backward.

This city has been very important to me. It's where I came of age, escaping the damp clutches of Oxford for a year to live on the Rue Pascal and teach in a lycée besides the prison in Fresnes. (Aaah, the whiff of garlic, Sauvignon Blanc and Gitanes on the early-morning Métro.) It's where I started in journalism 42 years ago, freelancing for a publication called *Paris Metro*, writing about the redevelopment of Les Halles. It's where I was freed by another language to reinvent myself and discovered that, despite appearances, I was born an outsider. It saved me somehow, allowed me to be. It's where I began to see that writing words down was not a choice but a need.

It's where I lived and loved and wandered and marveled and had two of my four children. It's where I returned from the Bosnian War – the 100,000 dead, the 2.2 million displaced, Sarajevo's torment – and understood the moral abdication of the bystander and the moral imperative of engaged decency, that word dear to Camus. It's where I made friendships that have lasted a lifetime. It's where I watched Alan Riding at work and learned, then watched Alan Riding at lunch and learned more. It's where I felt the precious bond forged in blood of France and the United States, and grasped the vigilance needed to safeguard the institutions that transformed, stabilized and protected this brittle continent: the European Union and

NATO. It's where I grappled with history and memory and understood, even before the Balkans, how distinct they are; and where I began to appreciate the how vulnerable the civilization symbolized by Paris is.

Style, as Flaubert observed, is "the discharge from a deeper wound." What stands between civilization and barbarism is the idea that nobody is above the law. There's a reason the American president's oath is to the Constitution, not to the people (*Das Volk*), who may become a mob.

For a long time, over the course of my life, I watched liberty and democracy and openness spread, not steadily but in spurts, not smoothly or evenly, but falteringly and unevenly. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the wars of Yugoslavia's destruction were pivot points of my life that cemented the link between America and freedom, America and peace. Alone among nations the United States could make me an insider overnight. That is why New York is my home.

I lived enough of the American century to feel it in my bones. That movie, however, has ended. History is not an argument leading to a logical conclusion, any more than human nature is composed of black-and-white. History is flux. In the mist, the specters of nationalism, nativism and xenophobia have stirred, now visible to everyone. Remember, the quest for homogeneous societies led the 20th century to its most unspeakable horrors.

The unimaginable can happen. We all watched in April as flames engulfed Notre Dame. Civilization is fragile. Democracy is fragile, like that toppled spire. The Jews of Germany have been advised not to wear kippas in public, to which the response of every member of the German government should

be to don a yarmulke. It is impossible today, it is dangerous, to ignore the spread of the hateful. When a universal reference goes up in smoke, when a sanctuary burns, an abyss opens up.

This abyss is one into which my president beckons us. I wish I did not have to say this. I am a naturalized American with an outsized belief in my country's capacity for good – the blemished beneficence of American power – and a patriotic desire to respect the occupant of the Oval Office, even when I disagree with him (and to date it always is a *him*).

Today, however, patriotism, as I understand it, requires something else. It demands the defense of the Constitution, the rule of law, truth, freedom, human rights and the planet itself against the ravages issuing from the Trump White House. Every day the American idea is sullied. People around the world, especially dictators, take note. For them, it's open season. Every day the distinction between truth and falsehood is undermined. I hear talk of fact-based journalism. What a ridiculous tautology!

The president chose Memorial Day weekend to pardon American war criminals and visit **Japan**, where, via Twitter, he declared himself in agreement with Kim Jong-un of North Korea on "Swampman Joe **Bidan** a low IQ individual," having earlier helped spread a video of Speaker Nancy Pelosi doctored to make her appear drunk or plain dumb, while assigning his spineless Attorney-General, William Barr, the new task of investigating the investigators of the Mueller Report.

If asked to define the antithesis of dignity, I would offer the above. Every American bears some responsibility, however indirect, for this moral collapse; acknowledging that is where recovery begins.

This, ladies and gentlemen, all occurred eighteen months before the next presidential election. Extrapolate from that to get a sense of what President Trump will do in October 2020. (Remember, he sent 7,000 troops to the southern border just prior to the midterms). Here's another task. Try to recall what you were outraged by just before being outraged by all this. I mean, the previous week. You can't, right? President Trump is the master of saying the unsayable to drown out the rest. He is the honey pot. We are the bees. How I tire of watching TV analysts dissect Trump. Too often, they play his game.

Looking ahead to next year, I feel uneasy. Americans are decent people. Trump is a miserable human being who authorized the forced separation of thousands of children from their parents. On that basis, the result should be a foregone conclusion. But the old politics are dead. You see that here in Europe. Venerable political parties are dying or flailing – the French socialists, the French Gaullists, the Social Democrats in Germany, the parties of the Italian center, even the British Labour and Conservative parties. It's a new age. The post-1945 world is gone. The post-cold-war world is gone. We've entered an era without a name. Donald Trump is its most formidable exponent.

At Harvard Business School they speak of disintermediation: that's a big word for the unfiltered onslaught technology enables, mainly via smart phones. Our societies have lost their bearings. **The mediators are gone.** Facebook Live is more powerful than The New York Times. Trump is in your face every minute. He has restored violence to a wan political stage of PowerPoint slides.

The incumbent always has an advantage. With a strong

economy, that advantage is redoubled. Trump has locked in his base, perhaps a third of the electorate. From there to winning is a leap but far from an impossible one. It's early days. A couple of dozen Democrats aspire to ensure we do not have five-and-a-half more years of Trump. What this election is about is straightforward. It's beating him, stupid.

Joe Biden, an honorable man, leads the field by some distance. I wish I were persuaded. I think what we've got right now may be **peak Biden**.

There has been a movement in people's minds; a radical change in the way people live, perceive and conduct their politics. Just look at the result we saw this week in Europe. The old paradigm won't work. Biden, whom I admire for his impassioned defense of the American idea, represents the old paradigm. That's a problem. He's ill placed as a pillar of the Ancien Régime to overturn the revolution. This is not personal. It's societal.

For all his Scranton blue-collar beginnings, he will be pilloried as a faithful servant of the Party of Davos that secured impunity for the financiers behind the 2008 meltdown, a heady growth in inequality, China appeasement and the arrogance of money-wooded dynastic Democrats estranged from their working-class constituency. Unfiltered politics prize agility over honor. Biden is not agile. To say China is "not competition for us," as he did recently, is almost disqualifying. **China is coming for us**. The world has moved on. Whither I'm not sure, but it has. Things shift. That's life — inexorable as biology.

The Democratic candidate with the most persuasive answers on immigration, jobs, inequality, education, climate and health care will win. Easy, right? Look what happened with

the Greens here in Europe. Where does that energy lie in the United States? With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, of course, AOC – what did I say about French wines?

She's too young to run and much too powerful to ignore. And so? Elizabeth Warren? Mayor Pete? Kamala Harris? Bernie? Beto? Bennet? Biden? I can't give an answer, except to say that I think Biden is where Hillary Clinton was in 2008, with the difference that we don't know yet who the Obama of 2020 will be. It's not just the United States that needs such a figure; it's the world.

Pax Americana had a good run. It was eroding before Trump; he applied the coup de grace. In this combustible transition, Paris reassures me. It is a refuge of our hopes, a repository of our fantasies, a redoubt of a quaint old word — solidarity. The city demands of us courage. “We'll always have Paris,” is probably the most famous line in the movies. It's sometimes forgotten what courage it took for Rick to utter that farewell to Ilsa.

Yes, we must always have something to lift our gaze, seldom more so than today when the most powerful man in the world offers a permanent invitation to the gutter. Emmanuel Macron's European Renaissance was stillborn. But Europe lives. This year will be remembered as the year the European election ceased to be a sideshow, the year Europeans voted in much greater numbers for their Parliament, the year Europeans awoke to the need to preserve the greatest miracle of the second half of the 20th Century, and the only miracle so unclassifiable we are reduced to calling it an **entity**: that union of a half-billion people, that peace magnet, that aspiration of the bloodied, that bastion of law, that **European Union**.

The debacle of Brexit has done a service by illustrating how painful self-destructive folly can be. Europe as an idea feels more alive to me today, more relevant and more urgent. It is the new home of multilateralism, a rules-based international order; of human rights and freedom. The Macron-Trump bromance withered, the fleeting infatuation of incompatible upstarts. Deeper Euro-American bonds endure. We must fight to preserve them, as this University does, just as we should fight to the last to keep Britain in Europe.

I am an optimist. South Africa, where my parents were born and I spent my infancy and some of the most formative moments of my childhood, leaves you with that. The inevitable cataclysm did not happen. The blacks did not rise up to avenge the crimes of Apartheid and chase my family and four million other whites out the country. It did not happen because of leadership, Mandela's and De Klerk's. It did not happen because the promise of the future was placed above the wounds of the past; coexistence – imperfect, agonizing, unsatisfactory – prevailed over vengeance. Compromise is a worn word that may save a million lives.

Recently I read an article on the French malaise: *“France today is racked by doubt and introspection. There is a pervasive sense that not only jobs — but also power, wealth, ideas and national identity itself — are migrating, permanently and at disarming speed, to leave a vapid grandeur on the banks of the Seine. The country’s manicured capital, impeccable roads, high-speed trains, glorious food, seductive scents and deep-rooted savoir-vivre provide a compelling image of wealth and tradition. But just as the golden statuary on the bridges of Paris distracts the eye from the homeless sleeping beneath the arches, so the moving beauty of France tends to mask what amounts to a kernel of despair.”*

That was written in 1997, 22 years ago, by a New York Times foreign correspondent called Roger Cohen. Things may not be as bad as they seem, the Yellow-Vest movement notwithstanding.

Each of us has a journey. I am a Jew of South African descent raised in Britain, shaped by France, an American now. These are the threads of my story and where they have left me is what I have tried to convey to you tonight. I am a bridge not a wall person.

I like these lines from Ecclesiastes: *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.*

It is a time to fight without relenting for what we believe against the rising tide of nationalist bigotry.

Perhaps you know the story of the old man on his deathbed approached by his children. “Dad,” they say. “We did not want to raise this before but feel we must now. Do you wish to be buried or cremated?”

A long pause ensues. “Oh, I don’t know,” he says. “Surprise me!”

Democracies will still surprise us.

As a man of bridges, I will end with the Pont Mirabeau, and Guillaume Apollinaire, one of my favorite poets, wounded in World War I, dead two years later of the flu at the age of 38. When I first lived here, I learned the poem by heart.

*Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine
Et nos amours
Faut-il qu'il m'en souviennne
La joie venait toujours après la peine*

I remember standing on that bridge reciting those lines more than four decades ago. And this, from the same poem: *Comme la vie est lente et comme l'Espérance est violente* – How slow life is, and how violent hope – *Comme la vie est lente et comme l'Espérance est violente.*

Some things just sound better in French.