

**“Where Are We Going,  
And Why Are We In This Handbasket?”**

By  
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I've been thinking a lot about *Alice in Wonderland* lately, especially the early chapters when Lewis Carroll's heroine is attempting to make sense of her new, nonsensical world.

You might recall that Alice, an inquisitive, intelligent character, begins her assessment of Wonderland with an almost scientific detachment, as if she's merely observing the strange happenings instead of actually living them. She has just fallen through the Rabbit Hole, landed unhurt, sipped the contents of a bottle marked “Drink Me,” and as her body begins to fold in on itself like one of those old-fashioned telescopes, all she can manage is a blunt, even clinical, “What a curious feeling.”

We, as a nation and as a society, have fallen through many rabbit holes during the last several years, each time landing in a new reality that, for some of us, is far stranger, far more illogical, than the one we knew before.

We've been brutally attacked, yet many of the people who were responsible for protecting us have been promoted or decorated.

We've attacked another country, yet that country didn't attack us.

We've been plunged into grief by the death of a former president, a 90-year-old man with a terminal illness, yet there seems to be no similar outpouring for the thousands of young, healthy, men and women who are being killed and crippled in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We're not even allowed to see their coffins or, in some cases, hear their names read on television.

We've elected a president, one who ultimately presided over eight years of unmatched prosperity, yet we impeached him, even though he broke no law.

We've elected another president, one with the worst economic record in decades, the one who was in charge when we were attacked, the one who led us into our costly, bloody war on the basis of, at best, paper-thin evidence, the one who manipulates or ignores science, who places ideology above competence, who wields fear as a political weapon, who alienates our allies, who restricts our freedoms at home while claiming freedom is on the march abroad, who worships wealth instead of honoring work, who instigates intergenerational conflict with his Social Security schemes, who . . . feel free to stop me when you've had enough . . . yet he is awarded another term, the highest honor any politician can receive.

"Curiouser and curiouser!" Alice exclaimed after a small bite of cake produced an effect opposite that of the "Drink Me" potion.

Sometimes, when I think about how we spent 40 million dollars investigating everything Bill Clinton ever did in his entire life, yet spent a mere 15 million investigating 9/11, and, as far as I know, not one dime investigating that mysterious rectangular bulge on President Bush's back, clearly visible in photographs and video from at least one of his debates with John Kerry, and not one dime investigating how Jeff Gannon, that fake reporter from the fake news agency, got press credentials to cover the White House, all I can say is curiouser and curiouser, indeed.

You might have heard the saying “show me your checkbook and I’ll tell you your values.” Well, I think getting answers to Bulge-gate and Gannon-gate alone ought to be worth a couple hundred grand, at least.

We are a nation divided. That’s become something of a cliché, I know, but it is absolutely true. I believe that the divisions we are facing today are far more insidious than the old battle lines drawn between Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, Red State and Blue State. Those conflicts are obsolete. Today, in virtually every area of our lives – political, social, spiritual – the adversaries are those who want to turn the clock of human advancement back, sometimes by centuries, and those who want to keep the human race moving forward, toward ever higher levels of achievement and enlightenment. Simply put, it’s the Regressives versus the Progressives, the agents of discord and fear versus the agents of hope and opportunity.

I believe this battle is real, and I believe it is extremely serious. This is a battle for the heart and mind of America. It’s a battle to determine whether we will continue to live up to the incredible example of our founders, themselves children of the Enlightenment, or whether we are going to usher in a new Medieval age, albeit with much better plumbing. I believe this is ultimately a battle for America’s soul because the outcome will define us, for ourselves and for the world, for generations to come. What’s at stake is nothing more, and nothing less, than who we are.

Words are very often best defined by their contexts, and concepts, especially nebulous ones like “America’s soul,” are best defined by stories. For the last few decades, Regressives have been telling us a story, a story as absurd as *Alice in Wonderland*, but lacking the literary merit. In this version of America, a few of the more prominent villains, in no particular order, are: France, taxes, free speech, immorality and everything it spawns – like

poverty, homosexuality, abortion, liberals and intellectuals, to name only a few – government, of course, and, the nemesis of all radical Regressives, Jane Fonda. The heroes, then, are the righteous individuals who, in addition to insisting on Freedom Fries for lunch, keep taxes low, government small, free speech in check, immorality, and all its children, locked in the attic, and Jane Fonda forever strapped in that North Vietnamese fighter plane. It's only coincidence, they might say, that these heroes tend to be wealthy white men who promise to make everything all right if the rest of us would just get out of their way.

This story has had the desired effect. Far too many Americans have been lulled to sleep by the sweet nothings that are at the hollow core of the Regressives' tale of America. And why not? Who doesn't love make-believe? Who wouldn't want to live in a moral nation where the highest quality schools and health care and public safety, etcetera, etcetera, are provided for all with minimal cost to individuals? Who wouldn't want to live in a place where you can go about your daily business unencumbered by government regulations and unchallenged by the crazy ideas of others? Who wouldn't run at top speed and willingly hurl themselves down that Rabbit Hole?

Who wouldn't? Well, on any given day, according to any given poll, about half of us have already jumped, about half of us who'll never jump, and a handful of us who don't know what to do.

A basic element of any story is conflict; obstacles are confronted and the result of the confrontation produces a consequence. It is the nature of the consequence that gives the story meaning. Conflict is easy to find in the Regressives' story. It's abundant because it's absolutely critical for their success. While Regressive agents in this country wage their divisive and despicable culture wars over gay marriage, religion, abortion, Terry Schiavo, pitting us against each other over questions that any enlightened society would reasonably,

and compassionately, leave to individuals, their masters enact policies that clearly favor the wealthy and push the American Dream further and further out of reach for our children. While Regressives are busy re-creating America in their own theocratic, self-righteous image, attempting to supplant Roosevelt's we're-all-in-this-together New Deal with their everyone-for-themselves Raw Deal, they have produced at least one insidious consequence: the severing of the connection between the present and the future. The fundamental message of the Regressives' story is that the present is not responsible for the success of the future.

We see their divisiveness and disregard almost everywhere. Instead of committing minds and money to alternative fuels and technologies that could break our addiction to foreign oil, Regressives call for drilling in Alaska, our last unspoiled wilderness. Instead of committing resources to the kind of education our children are going to need to compete in an increasingly competitive world economy, Regressives rekindle the tired, old debates over evolution. Instead of promoting enlightenment, they censor Buster the Bunny because an episode featured a lesbian couple, and they "out" SpongeBob SquarePants and his friend Patrick because they sometimes, God help us, hold hands. Instead of trying to heal the searing wounds of 9/11, one prominent member of the religious right panders to his base and declares: ". . . the pagans and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians . . . I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"

The worst mistake Progressives have made, and will continue to make at the peril of us all, is that we haven't fought back. Instead, we have become frozen in our utter disbelief that these kinds of battles still have to be fought. We can't believe that "intelligent design," which is nothing but creationism dressed up in a lab coat, is competing with Darwin in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. We can't believe, given the depth and breadth of our social and economic problems, that there are people and organizations with the energy to attack the natural

sensibilities of children to accept the differences in other people by attempting to vilify their cartoon characters. And as for blaming 9/11 on pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians, well, that's *my* base Jerry Falwell was wagging his finger at and this is one Progressive who's fed up with that kind of venom.

Our country is in the proverbial handbasket. We have to admit it. We also have to admit that we know exactly where Regressives are bent on taking us, no matter what they actually say. Regressives have lied, or, as George Lakoff maintains in his manifesto for Progressives *Don't Think of an Elephant*, they have done far worse than lie – they have betrayed the public trust. The betrayals of the Regressives, from their ridiculous tax cuts for the wealthy and their ill-conceived war, have been rationalized and accepted as the natural order of things. They even have the audacity to claim that they, and they alone, are today's truest patriots. The Regressives are winning, and they have been winning for years because Progressives, so cowed by the virulence of the radical elements of the Regressive movement, have adopted a squishy strategy that I'll call "honesty lite," an attempt to soften hard realities in order to lure people who haven't jumped in, but are still hovering somewhere around the Rabbit Hole. It hasn't worked; it's been like trying to sell fast food with the slogan "bland, but nauseating." "Honesty lite" has neither invigorated the Progressive base, nor mollified Regressive radicals. It hasn't inspired many people in the middle, either. The results of hundreds of political races over the last several years prove that as a strategy for political victory, lying beats "honesty lite" just about every time. What Progressive minded people – and I'm not talking just about political people here – I'm talking about everybody, everybody who cares about the future and knows that we are responsible for it, everyone who cares about America's soul, what we have to do is start winning back the public's trust. And the best way to win someone's trust is to tell the truth – clearly, forcefully and directly.

Wow, talk about radical.

Do you know what happens to a politician who tells the truth? Well, in Amherst he keeps getting re-elected to the State Senate. But in far too many places, telling voters what they need to hear is much riskier than telling them what they want to hear. Why support a politician who says a tax increase, even a modest one, is necessary to improve our schools, our health care, our safety, our children's opportunities, when there's another one saying we can have all that, and a tax cut, too? Why eat broccoli when there's a big tub of ice cream handy?

When President Kennedy united this country behind the goal of landing a man on the moon, he did so by appealing to our pioneering spirit. "We choose to go to the moon in this decade, and do other things," he said in 1962, "not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills." Imagine, an American leader actually telling us that something is going to be difficult. Contrast that with the "we'll-be-greeted-as-liberators" rhetoric that helped land us in Baghdad, or the claims of our governor, claims that won him the office, that billions in red ink could be erased without tax increases or devastating cuts to core services, and yet another insidious plot line of the Regressives' story is revealed: Regressives tap into our baser instincts, our dream of getting rich quick, of achieving success without sacrifice.

If Progressives are going to correct our course, we have to start taking risks, and we have to start taking them now. Progressives must counter Regressives by appealing to what's best in us – our desire to work and our capacity for innovation. Progressives must pose the question: Are we a people who confront hard truths with courage and intelligence, or are we a people who numb ourselves into readily accepting agreeable lies and defending them with

phony indignation? The mission Progressives must accept is this: We must discover whether truth can conquer lies.

It's not going to be easy. That's why we have to do it. Just a handful of the population. That's all we have worry about. The rest, I fear, are so far down the Rabbit Hole, for now anyway, that they are going to reject anything that doesn't fit their wonderland world view.

So, what's a Progressive to do?

The most important thing we have to do is reconnect the present with the future. And to do this, we have to dip into our past.

Any of you who know me, know that I often talk about the social contract, the idea that each generation does what is necessary to ensure that successive generations have better opportunities. Massachusetts' own John Adams articulated the social contract most eloquently when he wrote in a letter to Abigail: "I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy . . . in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music . . ."

The social contract – this is what I think of when I think about the soul of America. It has sustained and improved us for more than 200 years. It's the way the present thanks past generations for their sacrifices. It's a promise to the future, perpetually made, perpetually honored. Until now. Our generation, that's right, you and me, we who are the sons and daughters of the Greatest Generation – those venerable men and women who endured the Great Depression, who survived the Holocaust, who gave their lives, their limbs, their sanity to defeat fascism and imperialism – we are well on our way to becoming the first generation to break the contract. We have stood on their shoulders, the shoulders of giants, and now we are refusing to let our children stand on ours.

Call us The-Not-So-Great Generation.

That doesn't seem very patriotic to me. And it's certainly not something I want chiseled on our generation's tombstone.

It's time for Progressives, and, dare I say it, liberals, to start fighting back. We must commit, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor" to fulfilling the contract. Once we commit to this big-picture idea, the details will naturally follow. We must remind everyone, everyone who will lend half an ear to hear us, of the truths, the patriotic truths, the American truths that the contract contains.

Truth: No one is completely self-made. Even the billionaire who grew up poor in a shack with dirt floors climbed to the top on the social, economic and political structure that every American has paid for, that many Americans have fought and died for.

Truth: We are all in this together. Yes, we cherish our individuality, but our nation will not survive unless we recognize the strength and virtue that is inherent in the practice of taking care of each other.

Truth: Any worthwhile national endeavor should require some measure of sacrifice, from everyone, not just a brave, but disadvantaged few, as we are witnessing today with our so-called war on terror.

Truth: Nothing, *nothing*, is more important, more honorable, more necessary, than making sacrifices for future generations.

And finally, the most fundamental truth of all: God does not belong to any one country, one religion or, least of all, one political party. All of us, *all of us*, belong to God.

That's assuming, of course, God will still have us after the mess we're making of things.

Can truth beat lies? Can trust overcome betrayal? Can Progressives pull the two percent back from the edge of the Rabbit Hole and begin redefining who we are and what we stand for? It's getting pretty warm in this handbasket. Can we get out in time?

When things started to get hot for Alice, when the consequences of being in Wonderland began to seem all too real, she finally loses the stoic detachment she brought to her adventure.

At her trial, Alice is protesting the deranged Red Queen's demand for "sentence first, verdict afterwards," when the Queen, purple with rage, commands her to "Hold your tongue!"

"I won't," Alice responds, and in the chaos that follows, with the Red Queen shouting "Off with her head," Alice finally, at long last, finds the voice to speak truth to power. "Who cares for you?" she says, just before awakening from her dream. "You are nothing but a pack of cards."

A pack of cards. A pack of cards can only build a house of cards, and a house of cards, while intricate and fascinating, like many a lie, is not made to last. Any disturbance, even one barely perceptible, can clear the way for more solid structures.

Just ask Natalia Dimitruck.

Natalia is a Ukrainian who worked for the official state television network in her country. Her job was to provide sign language translations for the evening news broadcasts. She knew that deaf Ukrainians, who had no alternatives to state-run media, counted on her. It was a trust she held sacred.

Last November, as the Ukrainian presidential election began to disintegrate amid charges of fraud, Natalia experienced a crisis of conscience. While the news anchor reported

that the state-backed candidate had defeated the opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, Natalia, from her small inset in the corner of the TV screen, silently told the truth:

“The results . . . are rigged,” she signed, according to a *New York Times* report. “Do not believe them.” She went on to declare that Yushchenko had won, and, before leaving her post, signed: “I am very disappointed by the fact that I had to interpret lies. I will not do it anymore. I don’t know if you will see me again.”

Natalia Dimitruck took a risk. She roared the truth and a movement grew. Other journalists walked off their jobs, demanding the right to present an objective account of the massive demonstrations that had paralyzed Kiev, the capital city. Ultimately, the state-run media relented and began broadcasting images and reports of the protests across the country for every Ukrainian to see. In the end, Yushchenko won, the truth won, the house of cards tumbled, and the Ukrainian people, realizing who they really are, have begun emerging from their Rabbit Hole.

So, finally, what’s a Progressive to do?

Just imagine for a minute that everything is exactly as it is today. The war, and the betrayals that led us into it; the national deficit, and the tax cuts for the wealthy that are largely responsible for it; the disdain of our allies, and the arrogance that caused it; the breaking of the social contract, and the bankrupt philosophies that promoted and concealed it; the rectangular bulge on the president’s back, and the official shrugs that dismissed it; the fake reporter in the White House press corps, and the outrageous absence of outrage that accompanied it – as absurd as it may seem, there’s no escaping that this is our reality. But let’s change one thing. Let’s say that Progressives are in charge, that these are the policies of Progressive politicians, community leaders and intellectuals that pushed us down this Rabbit Hole.

What do you suppose Regressives would be doing?

They'd be fighting back. They would be unrelenting, unmerciful, unrepentant. We know this because Regressives over the past several years have already shown us what they are capable of. They have shown us that power is their only currency, that they will blithely ransack reason and the best interests of our country to get it, and betray any trust to keep it. That's who *they* are. And Progressives have to stop them. Progressives can no longer indulge in the luxury of waiting for rationality to return on its own. We have to restore it. We have hands, and we must use them. We have ideas, and we must share them. We have voices, and we must speak the truth until their power withers, until our part of the social contract is fulfilled, until America's soul is resurrected, until hope and opportunity have triumphed over fear and discord. This is how our generation can honor those whose sacrifices made us, this is how we can keep faith with those who will follow us, this is how we can be true to ourselves.

Because that's who *we* are.

At least, I hope it's who we intend to be.