

## THRIVING ON CHAOS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
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Regardless of how you voted on Tuesday, I can suggest four reasons to celebrate the election of Barack Obama as our 44<sup>th</sup> president. The first has to do with the state of race relations in our nation. As Thomas Friedman wrote on Wednesday, “And so it came to pass that on Nov. 4, 2008, shortly after 10 p.m. Eastern time, the American Civil War ended, as a black man—Barack Hussein Obama—won enough electoral votes to become president of the United States.” Friedman went on to say that “we wake up to a different country. Yes, the struggle for equality is never done. But we can start afresh from a new baseline. From this day forward: Everything really is possible in America.”

A second reason to rejoice is the way Obama energized young people across our nation. I vividly recall the day last spring when Zoe, who at 15 years old couldn't vote in this election, came dashing into the apartment after school, almost bodily dragged Holly and me to her computer screen, and insisted that we watch the now-famous “Yes We Can” video, with its tapestry of hope-filled faces and voices from across our nation. I knew then that an important new source of political energy had been tapped. Overall, voter turnout was up only 2 percent in this election compared to 2004; but turnout among voters under 30 was up nearly 20 percent. Thirty years from now, when Obama and at least two of his successors as president have faded from the scene, the leaders of our nation will be drawn from those whose energy and idealism were awakened by this election. It will be their country.

A third reason to cheer is that the American electorate endorsed the political necessity of a quality the ancient Greeks called *arête*, or excellence. In Aristotle's major treatise on ethics, he argued that people and things should be judged by whether or not they had realized their full potential, thereby achieving excellence. A knife, for example, achieves excellence if it holds a sharp edge and cuts well. Human beings who aspire to political leadership, Aristotle said, should demonstrate excellence in the qualities relevant to politics, including a voracious mind, a well-educated understanding, a disciplined judgment, and a deliberative temperament. Presidential historians will render their own decision in due course; but my own sense is that Senator McCain's selection of a running mate, and her subsequent attacks on the need for excellence in these areas, played a substantial role in his defeat.

A final reason to celebrate has to do with our standing in the world. As far as I could tell, it was an open question in the rest of the world as to whether American voters understood how badly we had bungled things in our foreign policy, and whether we cared enough to make a change. As it turns out, the majority of Americas did understand and care. I recall a political sign described by Adam Nagourney at the very end of a long article he wrote several days ago in *The New York Times*. The handmade sign showed a Confederate flag, along with these words: “Rednecks for Obama. Even we've had enough.” Especially among ordinary people around the globe, the sigh of relief has been palpable.

If we step back and ask about the election as a whole, however, the outcome seemed unlikely. Why? Human beings consistently prefer the known to the unknown, especially in times of stress. The human brain is a pattern-seeking organism. Whenever possible, our brains draw upon established patterns of thought, feeling, and action. To a brain, old ways are best. When we confront a new stimulus or circumstance, our brain tries to fit it into a customary pattern of understanding. In the face of a more-than-perfect storm of national and global challenges, the typical human tendency would be to hunker down and wait until the storm passes. After all, the time to change canoes is not when you're in the middle of the rapids.

Our problem today is that none of the old templates seem to apply. I recall a comment made early in the financial crisis by one economist who was tracking seismic disruptions in financial models of the U.S. economy. He warned about the type of catastrophic financial earthquakes that economists expect to see only once a century—because he had seen three in just the previous week. We're embroiled in two wars, making incremental progress in one at a cost of more than half a billion dollars a day, and losing ground in the other. The global economy has fallen apart, and even the best minds aren't sure how to put it together again. Pakistan, with its arsenal of nuclear weapons, is becoming dangerously unstable; ever-more-deadly viruses and ever-more-resistant bacteria are increasingly rampant; and we're fast approaching the time when it will be too late to do anything about global warming, even if we want to. We've never faced such a daunting array of challenges, any one of which could radically alter life as we know it.

The technical term for a situation where rules don't seem to apply and patterns don't appear to exist is chaos. Chaos is an ancient Greek word that originally meant emptiness: Chaos was the goddess who ruled over the void in the beginning. But chaos received its present-day meaning from the ancient Roman poet Ovid in the opening to his magnificent poem about the origin of the world, titled "Metamorphoses."

Before the sea was, and the lands, and the sky that hangs over everything, the face of Nature appeared the same throughout the whole world, a state we have called chaos: a rough, unordered mass of things, nothing at all save lifeless matter and warring atoms of ill-matched elements heaped in one. No sun as yet shone forth upon the world, nor did the waxing moon renew her slender horns; not yet did the earth hang poised by her own weight in the surrounding air, nor had the ocean stretched her arms along the vast shores of the world. Though there was land and sea and air, no one could tread that land, or swim that sea; and the air was dark. Nothing retained its shape; all objects were at odds, for within the one body, cold things fought with hot, and moist with dry, soft things with hard, things having weight with weightless things.

Ovid goes on to tell the story of how this unordered mass of things, this warring cauldron of ill-matched elements, was transformed into a well-ordered world—a cosmos, which is the opposite of chaos. The question facing us as a human community today is how we can do the same: transform the economic and political chaos that surrounds us into an orderly, unified, harmonious world. This question has a personal

dimension as well. At some point in our lives, each of us as individuals will experience chaos: a time when everything seems at odds, and the air is dark, and we cannot see a path ahead. For some of us, these present times may be our dark night of the soul. In such times, where do we look for signs of hope? Where does cosmos—the presence of order and wholeness in our lives—come from?

It comes from viewing chaos not as a calamity (even when it is), but as an opportunity. Chaos stands on the cusp of creation. If we can orient ourselves to the new reality that is about to emerge, we can put our lives back together again.

One of the best strategies for accomplishing this comes from an unlikely source. In his book titled *Certain to Win*, Chet Richards takes principles developed by the legendary fighter pilot and military strategist John Boyd and applies them to business. Some of Boyd's insights apply even more broadly as well.

Richards begins with Boyd's view that the basic circumstance of war is not the orderly execution of a battle plan, with each unit carrying out its pre-planned strategy and achieving its pre-determined outcome. Rather, war is waged in a state of chaos. The first casualty is knowledge; as the 19<sup>th</sup>-century military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz put it, "Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain." Bad information leads to errors in judgment and mistakes in execution. Before long, panic and confusion cascade into chaos.

Our view of the world, which Boyd refers to as our "orientation," depends on things happening in roughly the manner and time we expect them to happen. When they do not, we become disoriented, and "disoriented people become demoralized, frustrated, and panicked." In the stress of battle, soldiers who become disoriented can easily be defeated, regardless of their advantage in weapons or position. In other situations in life, this condition can also lead to a sense of defeat and despair. The challenge, Boyd says, is to harvest the fruits of chaos by reorienting ourselves to the world as it actually is and acting decisively within it.

The key to thriving on chaos is a skill Boyd calls agility, which is "the ability to rapidly change one's orientation—[or] worldview—in response to what is happening in the external world." In the context of battle, agility involves four distinctive activities: observe your environment (yourself; your opponent; the physical, mental, and moral situation; and potential allies and opponents), orient yourself to decide what it all means, reach some type of decision, and attempt to carry out the decision. Observe, orient, decide, and act.

It turns out that the most critical step in the agility cycle is the first one: observe. This is much more than a process of looking around. Rather, it is a relentless search for the truth about your situation. The idea is to "go out and get all the information you can by whatever means possible." Why? Because you can never be sure beforehand which stray idea will prove essential.

In Boyd's conception, the first step—observe—is the only input from outside yourself. For this reason, how well your orientation matches the real world is largely a function of how well you observe. You are looking for mismatches between your current worldview and the world as it actually is. "A general rule is that bad news is the only kind that will do you any good.... You must seek out and find data that doesn't fit with your worldview and you must do this while there is still time." Otherwise the world will change and you will find yourself disoriented. You will have lost the initiative, which is

dangerous in any conflict. However, if you are able to get the facts right and are willing to orient yourself to them, then astute decisions and effective actions will follow.

The principle of agility applies directly to political leadership, especially in the observation phase. Look for situations that don't fit into your worldview. Listen to knowledgeable people who don't share your prejudices and perspectives. Refuse to shrink from bad news or try to explain it away. The facts about the world will not change because you refuse to accept them. The only way to stay oriented is to stay engaged.

This same approach can serve us as individuals. Watch for signs that your partner or spouse is unhappy in your relationship. Listen for hints that your child is struggling or losing her way. Pay attention to indications that your approach to work or school isn't working any more. Remember, bad news is the only kind that will warn you of becoming disoriented—of losing touch with the people and world around you.

I find Boyd's insights into agility extremely useful. But there is another dimension to agility, one which Boyd does not address. In times of turmoil and chaos, it is vitally important that we attend to what has changed in our lives and in our world. But it is equally important that we orient ourselves to the things that haven't changed and never will—to values and ideals that will endure the vicissitudes of time and chance.

The book of Philippians in the Christian New Testament is a letter from the Apostle Paul, one of the early founders of the Christian Church, to a small and struggling congregation in the city of Philippi, then a distant outpost of the fledgling Christian movement. The congregation was torn apart by dissension from within and buffeted by opposition from without. In his letter, Paul tried to orient them to their new reality as followers of Jesus in a world dominated by the customs of the Romans and the religion of the Hebrews. His guidance is Boyd-like: remember this, ignore that, pay attention to these things, and forget those.

He closes his letter, however, by reminding the congregation to stay focused on the things that matter most. Writing in Greek, he urges them to take account of *arête*, of excellence. He says, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, take account of these things."

The presence of chaos in our lives invites us to redraw our map of the known world. Amid the chaos of our time, we stand on the cusp of creation. As individuals and as a nation, our challenge is to observe the world as it actually is and to reorient ourselves to it. For the most part, we know what brought the chaos upon us; and we know what it will take to create something new. Among other things, it will require that we take account of praiseworthy things. In whatever battle we find ourselves, excellence begins with unflinching honesty, advances with unyielding purpose, and fulfills itself through unwavering discipline. This is our moment of creation.