

## The Question of Power in History: Great Men or Small Groups?

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A couple of weeks ago, Farhad Manjoo, a self-professed “politics junkie,” tried to go for a week ignoring stories about the current US President. The result, he said, was “like trying to bite into a fruit-and-nut cake without getting any fruit or nuts.” Looking at data from a company called mediaQuant, that counts every mention of a particular brand or personality in all media outlets, Mr Manjoo learned that Mr. Trump got more coverage in the month of January than the next 1,000 famous people worldwide put together. If you have 3.2 billion people with internet connections consuming media 4-8 hours a day—then “anyone who dominates it is going to be read about, talked about and watched by more people than ever before” in history.

Now we know that there’s a lot more going on in the world day-to-day than what this man and his minions are saying, doing and tweeting. Even at the height of World Wars I and II, media were sensibly balanced and full of other stories and topics. But we live in a different media ecosystem today—one that works according to “social media feedback loops” which are profoundly affecting the way we consume cultural and media products. Every story that shows any signs of life on Facebook, Twitter and other media platforms is copied endlessly by every other media outlet. When we “like” or re-tweet a story, it creates a “social signal” that draws more attention to it and amplifies ever more coverage. Every new story prompts outrage or commendation which puts the stories higher in what’s fed to us, which encourages more talk, more posts and tweets and on and on it goes. It’s not that coverage of the new US administration is unimportant, but it is clear that our tech and algorithmic-fueled contemporary media ecosystem is amplifying Trump’s presence and impact way beyond what’s called for. (Farhad

Manjoo, “I ignored Trump news for a week. Here’s what happened,” *NY Times*, February 22, 2017).

Now I bring this up not only because it's affected the way I read, consume and am impacted by the news these days—I'm also trying to take a bite of the fruit-and-nut cake and finding it very hard indeed to not to get a mouthful of fruit and nuts—I bring it up because the recent dominance of this one person and his clique has resurrected one of the most enduring and contested issues in how we understand human history and how it works.

In the 1830s, the British writer Thomas Carlyle delivered a series of lectures in which he argued that "*Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.*" That is, so this theory goes, historical events and goals are driven by extraordinary individuals—people who wield power sufficient to determine the course of history. At first glance, this idea would appear non-controversial: think of characters like Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Mohamed, Napoleon, Lincoln, Hitler, Catherine the Great, Margaret Thatcher, Deng Xiaoping. Think of the contemporary omnipresence of Trump and our fixation on his every tweet and twitch. Just browse the history and biography shelves at any big, popular bookstore. And what we might conclude is that the actual engine of history and significant change is the result of relatively few persons, their private motivations and supersized, individual character traits. That's basically what we've been told for millennia by effective partisan publicists fixated on heroically proportioned persons and their deeds. Narratives of extraordinary leaders are incredibly seductive because they appear to give us a compelling story line and seem to make order out of the chaos of history

But focusing on individual politicians, military leaders and public figures sets us up to *not* see what may more truly account for the texture and reality of history—which is, in fact, the unimaginably complex, rich and interconnected *sum of all* that people have felt, thought and

done in the past leading up to this very moment. It is the vast, grassroots strengths, the ordinary competence manifest in the intimate lives of regular people who almost inadvertently come together in a shared purpose that may more truly count. Human history is not the plaything of heroes who think they shape and change it according to their will. Those who think that so-called great men and women, or a great theory, or idea can possibly account for it all, discern it all, and map out where it's all going are seriously mistaken (and possibly dangerous).

Perhaps the first and, to this day, the most powerful take down of the great man theory of history was not pulled off by a professional academic, and you won't find it in the history or political science or philosophy section of the library. Rather, it's laid out in the compelling and magisterial pages of a novel. I'm talking about Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* first published in 1869. And I think 2017 is ripe for a Tolstoy year.

*War and Peace* begins in 1805 and ends in 1817. It tells the story of the Russian people's severe, painful and ultimately successful resistance to the invasion of armies led by Napoleon in 1812. It's epic in scope and depicts a nation in crisis. There *are* extended, extraordinary passages about battles and terrific analyses of rival interpretations of history. But it's also intimate in detail—*War and Peace* focuses in on three families and six main characters. We read about their everyday lives: their romances, basic joys, anxieties, and jealousies, their dinner parties and money worries, and their heartfelt, perceptive conversations about culture, farming and the meaning of life. I mean there's something here for just about any reader to dive into. And it's not that difficult to get through, once you understand that it consists of several bittersweet love stories interwoven with the Napoleonic Wars. (And besides, it's a piker compared to the *Game of Thrones*!)

At its heart though, and woven throughout the scores of chapters of *War and Peace*, is a fierce and compelling refutation of the theorizing of historians and others who would presume to force the immense, myriad complexities of human life into reductive interpretive straitjackets. Above all, Tolstoy aims to disentrall us of our obsession with celebrity and theory-driven ideas of history and culture. Some examples:

Prior to battle, the meticulous preparation by generals, all their plans, their belief that they can manipulate the collective behaviour of men on the field of war amount to absolutely nothing in the heat and bewildering confusion of mortal combat.

Supreme in this regard is Napoleon himself. Given the tumult and smoke shrouded field of battle, he can hardly discern what's actually happening. By the time couriers return to him—and he boldly asserts his conquering vision—the chaos of battle has already moved in a new direction. He is too removed from the real lives of soldiers—from the real lives of people—to really drive the course of history. Tolstoy clearly detests France's emperor who he presents as a vain, egomaniac and narcissist, surrounded by bootlicking toadies who curry to a petulant manchild who views himself as the center of the world. Napoleon thinks he is issuing bold orders, but Tolstoy shows the emperor is merely engaging, ultimately, in an empty performance of power.

At the beginning of the novel, Andrei Bolkonsky, raised in an elite military family, belittles domestic life; he dreams only of martial glory, thinks Napoleon is a genius, and has totally bought into the great man theory of history. But the experience of the chaos of actual combat, the incompetence of his superiors, and the epiphany he experiences when he observes the dedicated competence of a modest artillery officer and his comrades, and when he receives a grave wound—Bolkonsky, as if for the first time, after having gone through all this and looking

up at the immensity of the sky, is flooded with a realization of the futility of all this mayhem, a love for his young family and compassion for the men in combat on both sides.

Through the pages of *War and Peace*, Natasha Rostova morphs from an immature, flighty young woman dazzled by privilege and impetuous romance into a mature adult who, through experiences in the severe school of life, casts off slavish attention to the glittering allure of fashion, transient passions and aristocratic power.

The young, fabulously wealthy and motherless Pierre Bezukhov is tossed to and fro by a succession of enthusiasms: from besotted hero worship to revolutionary ardour, from debauched revelry to the cult of Freemasonry. Barely escaping death in battle and in the occupation of Moscow, he ends up a prisoner of the fleeing French armies. There, he's taken under the wing of a peasant soldier who, with patient, maternal-like kindness, shows him the answer to his tortured spiritual searching—that it lies in human connection, compassion and the inherent interdependence of all things. (Which leads Pierre to an extraordinary vision of the world.)

Singly, and together, the young main characters of *War and Peace* undergo moving and utterly convincing transformations; their experiences have the ring of truth and life. Or so the reader feels and would hope. To Prince Andrei, Natasha, Pierre and others is revealed the bewilderingly random, well-nigh incomprehensible alignment of events, the incalculable but real power and influence of seemingly ordinary individuals, and the elusive spirit of the people that can coalesce into movements of great importance—our lives and dreams possess a power and value more than equal to those of so-called great men. In Tolstoy's view, there are no conquerors, heroes or saviors; there are simply people with the power to save themselves and each other...or not....

There are a couple of readings in our hymnal quoting words written by Margaret Mead and Dorothy Day which read something like this:

Mead writes: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

And this from Dorothy Day: *People say, what is the sense of our small effort?*

*They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. [We can't] sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do.*

These Tolstoyan-esque statements are in our hymnal because we not only hope them to be true, but because Unitarians and Universalists have embodied and carried forth their insights. On a number of occasions here, I have claimed that, though always small in number, we have played a historically significant vanguard role in effecting crucial changes in our culture—from pulling down the doom-laden stranglehold of Calvinism in North America with our forthright belief in universal salvation, to our precedent setting ordination of women and gay, lesbians and trans-persons to our professional clergy, to furnishing some of the key words and ideas—like the arc of the moral universe bending to justice—that inspired the righteous, the world-changing rhetoric and work of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

And surely, we know we're not alone. Two weeks ago, so many people flooded the phones of lawmakers in Arizona that they effectively killed a proposed piece of legislation that would have prosecuted protest organizers under state racketeering laws. In Hawaii, a doctor treating the ills of the homeless, began writing prescriptions for his clients mandating that they must be housed—a move that is finally shaming health and housing authorities there into action.

In northwestern Finland, frustrated by the dismal failure of conventional paradigms for treating people in emotional and mental distress, doctors, nurses and social workers are effecting a revolution in mental health. Using a family and social network approach, called “Open

Dialogue,” these mental health teams have dramatically reduced hospitalizations, the use of psychiatric drugs, and the exorbitant costs of mental health care. They have the best documented outcomes and recovery rates in the Western world. More than 80% of the people they work with fully recover—they’re going back to school, finding jobs, getting off disability and getting on with their lives. That’s exactly *opposite* of what’s happening in Canada, the US and other countries in Europe. (Well, people are beginning to take notice of what’s happening in Finland. Just last week, an on-line program to educate professionals and others about “Open Dialogue” was immediately overwhelmed by close to a thousand people more than the course and its instructors could handle.)

Beginning twenty years ago, in a pilot project guided by the principles of permaculture, a group of European ecologists have transformed 330 devastated, barren acres in southern Portugal on the brink of desertification into a site of lush vegetation, flourishing wildlife habitat and sustainable food production. Around the world, people are taking note of what’s happening. That permaculture team in Portugal is now consulting with the UN, NGOs and governments on water and land management in Israel and Palestine, Jordan, Turkey, Togo, Brazil, Kenya, Columbia and South Sudan. The ecological knowledge is out there and its effectiveness is beginning to spread. And given what’s happening around the globe as a result of climate change, that knowledge and experience is needed now more than ever.

*One more story.* Before the water and housing crisis in Attawapiskat, Ontario, that brought its chief, Theresa Spence, to go on a hunger strike, that community faced an education crisis. In 2000, their primary school was shut down because of site contamination as a result of a diesel fuel leak that took place in 1979! Despite federal government promises that a new school would be built, Attawapiskat school kids were still getting educated in mould-ridden portables

eight years later. And then they learned that the federal government had canceled the school building project altogether. Well, a rebellion ensued.

In May 2008, Attawapiskat's Grade 8 class traveled to Ottawa for the National Day of Action for Indigenous People and to meet with then Indian Affairs minister Chuck Strahl who told the kids, in his well-appointed office, that the school wouldn't be built; it simply wasn't a government priority. Minister Strahl hadn't taken into account the thirteen year old girl sitting across from him by the name of Shannen Koostachin who looked at him straight in the eyes and said: "Oh, we're not going to quit; we're never going to give up until we get our school."

And then that stoic, brave little girl and her classmates went out and spoke to a bank of media cameras about what had just taken place. "Hello everybody," she said, "my name is Shannen Koostachin; I'm from the Attawapiskat First Nation. Today I am sad because Mr Chuck Strahl said he didn't have the money to build our school. But I didn't believe him. And I told Mr Strahl that we will not quit until every First Nation child has a school that they are proud of and that they can call their own."

Shannen and her classmates went on from there to start the biggest youth-led children's rights campaign in Canadian history that successfully led to a vote in the House of Commons in 2012 to put reserve schools on par with non-reserve provincial schools. Shannen got her school in Attawapiskat, but never stepped inside it. She died in a car crash in 2010 just before her sixteenth birthday while out organizing for improved funding for on-reserve First Nations education....

In spite of the media ecosystem gorging, fixating on the narcissist-in-chief south of the border, and on other so-called "great men and women," we can de-mesmerize, decontaminate

ourselves by reading and learning from stories like those of Shannen Kootsatchin and others; we could start, as well, by opening to the pages of *War and Peace* and its hard won wisdom.

Adults can share picture books that foreground perseverance, empathy and a sense of wonder for nature, so that we help our young ones become compassionate and resilient.

We can stand out when we can; someone has to. It may feel strange, but without some unease, there is no freedom. Power wants our bodies softening in a chair and our emotions dissipating on a screen. We can practice corporeal politics, make new friends, make eye contact and small talk so that we can find our people and organize and march with them.

We must believe in truth. If nothing's true, then no one can criticize power because there's no basis upon which to do so. If nothing's true, then all is just spectacle.

Let's be alive to the expansive, treacherous use of political vocabulary like "terrorism," "extremism" and "emergency," and be kind to our language by avoiding clichés and phrases that seemingly everybody else uses.

And when leaders of state and elsewhere set a negative example, let's remember our professional commitments to just practices and ethical codes of conduct—it's a good way to protect the institutions we actually care about; they don't protect themselves; they go down like dominoes unless each is defended from the beginning.

(from "Let's stand out..." above, taken from Timothy Snyder, "20 lessons from the 20<sup>th</sup> century on how to survive Trump's America," <http://inthesetimes.com/article/19658/20-lessons-from-the-20th-century-on-how-to-survive-in-trumps-america>)

Of all people, we should not doubt that change for good can happen as a result of what individuals and small groups of people can dream and do. Setbacks, dispiriting times and calamities have happened in the past and many more are sure to come. But despair is not an option; and we will lay one brick at a time to build the house of hope and justice. That's who we are and should be; that's what we do—one thought, one word, one deed at a time.

***Suggested reading:***

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*. (Yes, we can do it!)

Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: an Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (the best short book-length account)

Ani Kokobobo, "Tolstoy's *War and Peace* can inspire those who fear Trump's America,"—this is the article that spurred me to write the sermon. [http://www.salon.com/2017/02/03/how-tolstoys-war-and-peace-can-inspire-those-who-fear-trumps-america\\_partner/](http://www.salon.com/2017/02/03/how-tolstoys-war-and-peace-can-inspire-those-who-fear-trumps-america_partner/)

David A. Bell, "Donald Trump is Making the Great Man Theory Great Again," <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/12/donald-trump-is-making-the-great-man-theory-of-history-great-again/>

Ira Chernus, "Time to bring back the "Great Man" theory of history?" <http://historynewsnetwork.org/blog/153199>

Marc Elliot Stein, "The Trump crisis is America's Tolstoy moment," <http://pacifism21.org/trump-crisis-americas-tolstoy-moment>

Charlie Angus, *Children of the Broken Treaty: Canada's Lost Promise and One Girl's Dream*

Anna Leach, "Arid land to fertile Eden: permaculture lessons from Portugal," *The Guardian*, March 7, 2017

on "Open Dialogue," see Robert Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*, pp. 339-41, 361-2, and Jaakko Seikkula, Birgitta Alakare, Jukka Aaltonen; "A Two Year Follow-Up on Open Dialogue Treatment in First Episode Psychosis: Need for Hospitalization and Neuroleptic Medication decreases," *Social and Clinical Psychiatry*, 2000, 10(2), 20-9); Jaakko Seikkula et al, "Five-year experience of first-episode non-affective psychosis in open-dialogue approach: Treatment principles, follow-up outcomes, and two case studies," *Psychotherapy Research*, March 2006; 16 (2), 214-28