



“Seek the Moral Common Ground, Not the Political Middle Ground”

a review by Dr. Dick Burkhardt of

Beyond the Messy Truth:

How We Came Apart * How We Come Together

By Van Jones (2017)

Van Jones takes both the Left and the Right to task for fomenting the cultural wars and political gridlock. His call is to drop the “politics of accusation” and initiate a “politics of confession”, where “all sides can start to own up to our own roles in creating this mess” (p xv). His strategy is to develop a “bipartisanship from below”, based on the common ground that he himself has found, from initiatives to end mass incarceration to stopping the epidemic of opioid deaths.

Van Jones, a renowned African American liberal activist and now CNN journalist, grew up in the rural South with mentors from across the political and racial spectrum. He is a living rejection of “identity politics”, a rare man, who sought out and formed an alliance with Newt Gingrich (hated by the Left) to make real progress toward criminal justice reform. Few can match Van Jones’ political depth and humanity (he’s Christian in the best sense).

Yet Van Jones does come up a little short on historical depth. He needs to read Peter Turchin, the eminent scientific historian of the rise and fall of regimes and empires, and how limits-to-growth is already impacting planet earth and all humanity, with much worse to come. Common threats open up the space for common ground, but first they must be understood and engaged, instead of succumbing to the delusion of continued economic and technological growth as our savior.

But Van Jones comes across as a superb politician, seeking to cut across party lines to get things done. Nor is this new, as when I heard him speak a dozen years ago, I thought I was listening to the next President of the United States. He tells liberals to embrace not just the “historically marginalized” but the “newly marginalized” (p 25), such as big sections of the white working class. And to seek common ground with people of faith. “We can disagree with conservatives. But we should stop disrespecting them” (p 39). End the “circular firing squad”: “when people use confrontational tactics in their own coalitions, then you have a movement that is too injured internally to play a healing role externally” (p 54). “The country is waiting for a pro-democracy movement that can inspire it and not just critique it” (p 57).

Addressing conservatives, Van Jones gets right to the point: “The Trump administration is discarding your traditions and heritage. When will you come to your own defense?” (p 66). As to free speech, for both sides: “We want students to be physically safe, but emotionally and intellectually strong” (p 69). As to Christian domination: “My ability to follow the social gospel depends on my right to religious freedom” (p 73). “Tribalism is at risk of taking down conservatism and perhaps America with it” (p 76). “As long as race prejudice is allowed to hijack conservatism, the party of Lincoln will never be the party of color-blind meritocracy” (p 79). “If conservatives want allies to foster a rebirth of American patriotism, you need look no further than the immigrant communities that you have long stigmatized” (p 81). As to voter suppression: “I would also think that a conservative who respects democracy would want voters to pick their elected representatives, rather than the other way around” (p 84). “Republicans built an army to win the culture wars. Now, having sacked Rome, they’re facing tough problems” ... “Mitch McConnell’s legislative priorities were negative, not positive” (p 87). “You accuse the Democrats of letting down our poor urban voters. But the modern conservative movement is structured to ignore its rural and suburban base in the same way” (p 88).

To add a much-needed dimension to this simplistic liberal vs conservative analysis, Van Jones considers class. This yields the four-way politics of the 2016 election: Liberal elitism (Hillary Clinton), Conservative elitism (Jeb Bush), Liberal populism (Bernie Sanders), and Conservative populism (Donald Trump). Yet studies concluded that identity was even more important than class in Trump’s narrow victory: In other words, an apparent big win for racism and white supremacy. To his everlasting credit, Van Jones digs up the real lesson: “If we work to address people’s legitimate economic concerns, it follows that they will be less vulnerable to the politics of fear and anger” (p 108).

To top it off, Van Jones quotes Nelson Mandela, “If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.” (p 122), meaning, to seek the moral common ground, not the political middle ground (p 184).