

# A Word on What Has Been Happening Lately

By Christian Skoorsmith

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(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qvza3VOICR8&t=881s>)

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(music in) I'm Christian Skoorsmith, a hypnotist and hypnotherapist in Seattle, Washington. I don't have a podcast. I'm not a regular content creator. When I have time and the inclination, I put something out there that I feel is of unique benefit or perspective, in the hopes of making the world a better place. This is one of those times. Let's lean on hope, while staying grounded in the real. (music fade out)

I'm sure I'm not alone in reflecting a lot this past week on the election of Donald Trump and wrapping my head around the implications – what it means about the people in this country and elsewhere in the world, what it means moving forward, trying to project the consequences and outcomes and next steps. And, honestly, there has been precious little I've come up with to make sense of what happened, where it seems we are, the path we've chosen as a people... at least very little that doesn't just fan the flames of my own ego and righteous indignation.

That's an important point for me to remember. Because a lot of the 'explanations' (I'm putting that word in air quotes or scare quotes, if you will) a lot of the 'explanations' my mind and heart offer me aren't really about understanding what happened but about making me feel better ... and possibly even at the expense of being true.

And this time – in our nation as a collective and in ourselves as individuals – this is a good time for reflecting on that all-too-human weakness, where between uncomfortable truth and just comfort we tend to land on the latter. And things are pretty uncomfortable for a lot of us right now.

Trump's election – especially after the past two years of criminal indictments and convictions and abhorrent rhetoric and corruption – after all that, Trump's election and the sweeping Republican congressional victory seemed like we stepped off the curb without realizing it. It was a jolt that I didn't see coming and that I feel in my spine. I can look back and see the curb, but it doesn't help, doesn't change anything, doesn't make me feel better. If anything, the banality of the curb makes it worse. It is really difficult for me and the close friends I've spoken frankly with to wrap our heads around.

I'm going to use the same phrase that conservative talking heads have been using, but I'm meaning something different. I think this is a good time for us – those of us on the left, progressives, if you will – this is a good time for us to do some soul searching.

Now, I don't mean that in the way far-right news hosts or podcasters do. They, of course, want the Democrats to move their policies more to the right. And really, that isn't even really true. What they want is to feel self-righteous and vindicated. When they say things like “the left needs to rethink their priorities,” they're not talking to the left. They're talking to their own like-minded audience. The Republicans – just like any far-right party – are primarily interested in power, and it is a power play to get one's adversaries and enemies to doubt themselves. But even then it isn't primarily about Democrats' own self-image.

Think of any bully – they may or may not throw a punch, but they sure as hell will talk shit about the person. A really good abuser never has to raise a finger, because they have already cultivated a language that their victim understands and that wounds them far more than a punch ever could. What I'm saying is that these pundits and politicians and talk-show hosts don't *actually* want Democrats to change their positions on anything. What they want is to puff themselves up and put others down. The

victory lap, as it were, is strategic: it is meant to drive their victory home, make it undeniable, make it seem like it is not just true in this moment, but The Truth with a capital T.

And I say that with only half-judgment or criticism. Really, it's natural. I can hardly blame them. It is so human to do that. In fact, it's so human I'm certain that it's unconscious. They probably don't even realize that they're doing it.

But that right-wing talking point jab isn't what I'm talking about. I'm not saying we should reconsider our policy commitments or principles... I mean, maybe we do that. But that's not what I'm talking about right now.

When I say it is a good time for soul searching, I'm talking about the opportunity to really look inside ourselves to discover what is there for us to learn in this moment – to learn about ourselves individually, maybe about our “side” of the political divide, or about our country, or about the darker, more violent and reactionary and scared parts of ourselves as persons and as a civilization. It is a good time for soul-searching. Because few things open us up like acknowledging a deep wound.

What has seemed to me, in all of this, as a helpful way to understand what has been happening in our culture is the phenomenon of scapegoating. The psychological act of projection, where we put our sin – some aspect or quality about ourselves that we don't like, that is contradictory to how we understand ourselves (or wish ourselves to be) or how we want others to perceive us, something that is embarrassing or shameful or weak or evil – this thing we unconsciously sense about ourselves that is so contrary to how we want to think we are, is maybe even *dangerous* to think is a part of us because if it is known or seen we might lose position or safety or love or whatever... The prospect of confronting that thing about us – our sin or shame or lack – that we unconsciously assign it to someone else outside of us, where we can ridicule it, attack it, condemn it in *them*, as a way of compensating for those qualities or shortcomings in ourselves. And this happens entirely *unconsciously* – in fact, it *has* to. If it was conscious, it wouldn't work. If we consciously *knew* that we were unfairly assigning some quality to someone else not because it was true but because it really reflected something we didn't like about ourselves, hoping we could convince ourselves that *they* are really the problem and not us... well, if we knew we were doing that, it wouldn't work. It wouldn't be very convincing, and so it wouldn't feel good, wouldn't make us feel better – which is the whole point of scapegoating. Scapegoating isn't about what's true, it is about making us feel better at the expense of someone else, almost certainly unfairly.

This is an entirely understandable and all-too-human thing to do. We do it all the time – so often and so seamlessly that we hardly ever think to question it or recognize it for what it is. And the fact that it often makes us feel better – at least in the short run – makes it even harder to work against. It works *because* it makes us feel better. Now, whatever is “wrong” is not about me, it is about *them*.

It is the classic schoolyard bully who is bullied himself at home or ignored or insecure for whatever reason, and so he projects his own feared weakness or powerlessness or insignificance or perceived worthlessness onto some other kid and feels victorious over those feelings because he is victorious over the other kid. From the outside, we can all see it – that bully isn't really attacking that little kid, he's really trying to attack those parts of himself that make him feel ashamed or unloved or unworthy. The bully doesn't see it, of course, and the little kid probably doesn't either. From the outside, though, it is pretty clear.

Scapegoating is where an individual or community assigns some quality or character or responsibility to another individual or population and then expels the scapegoat as a way of expiating themselves from responsibility or bearing the weight of that quality or characteristic or “sin” themselves. It's classic, really. Almost cliché.

It is so easy – because it *feels* so right – to think they *are* responsible, that it *is* their fault, that this thing I believe about them really *is* true. It is powerfully seductive to think that if we just get rid of

*them* then everything will be alright. Which, of course it won't be, because nothing really has changed. With the schoolyard bully or a political party, nothing has changed because it really wasn't about the scapegoat. The systems are still in place or the thought or behavior or quality is still undealt-with in us, so it will happen again. It really wasn't about them.

But, for that moment, we feel better about ourselves, so it must be true. For it to feel better, we have to scapegoat unconsciously. We can't do it intentionally.... Which is an important quality of scapegoating: once we recognize it as scapegoating, it no longer works. That is, if we can keep that in mind. Remember, it is really hard to see from the inside.

This is so deeply ingrained in us that it seems like just part of being human. It might be hardwired into our brains, into how we make sense of the world, after millions of years of evolution as a social species when tribal inclusion was the literal difference between life and death. Maybe a part of our brains cannot handle the possibility that we are not who we think we are, that we are not deserving of the protection and security of our community, that there is something in us that makes us at fault for our community's current suffering.

And this is deeply connected to another unconscious, implicit conviction we have: that what happens to us is a result of something we've done, is a reflection of who we are or our value or worth. It is why people wear nice clothes, drive expensive cars, wear jewelry, have big houses... partly it is to fool other people and partly it is to fool ourselves. The implication is, if we are "successful" (again, in scare quotes) that must mean we are good: worthy, smart, loved, valuable, important... whatever. What happens on the outside is supposed to say something about who we *really* are on the inside.

Again, it doesn't make sense when it is conscious, when we say it out loud. We all know you can't judge a book by its cover, or a person by the clothes they wear, that a person's circumstance is only partly a reflection of whatever decision they've made in life. If you've learned nothing else from board games, you've learned that – that who actually wins in the end really isn't a reflection of skill or intelligence or goodness or worth... there's *some* strategy, but the reason we roll the dice is a tacit admission that our fate isn't entirely up to us. (Yet, even with board games, when we win we feel great about ourselves, because we can believe for that moment that we really *are* special!) It is so ingrained in us, we can hardly avoid it! Like I said, it could even be hardwired into our brains. Or it might be part of the software we all absorb really early on.

Practically, from the time we're born, when we do something our caregivers approve of, we get hugs or treats or smiles or good grades or pats on the back. When we do something not approved of, something our caregivers do not like, we get the cold shoulder, frowns, spankings, yelled at, sent to our room or the corner alone, whatever... That happens in order to make us feel bad so that we don't do that again. And the lesson we implicitly learn is that what happens to us is a reflection of what we do, our choices and actions. Our circumstances are our fault and because these lessons came at first in our relationships with the people whose love made us feel safe, we learned that our circumstances reflect some felt truth about us: our worth or lack of it, our lovability or lack of it. It goes right to the core of us. And because it is all learned implicitly, it is really difficult to recognize explicitly or consciously. We don't "think" it is true – like I said, it sounds silly when we say it out loud – it just feels 'real' or the way things are, just how the world is.

This unconscious quality is what makes it so powerful: it feels right... at least from the inside. Like when we win at a game, or when our sports team or political party wins, or when we wear nice clothes, or get a good grade or the key to the city.... Part of what feels good is that we really believe that these things mean we are good enough, worthy of being loved or worthy of security, being safe in the tribe, that we're not going to be voted off the island... today.

This natal fear of being cast out is so motivating and frightening that we will do almost anything to avoid it. This implicit, shared understanding that what happens to us is a reflection of our

worthiness... tells us that we are always on the edge of being found out to be not-good-enough or not as good as we expect ourselves to be... such that if *we* even knew about our own darkness or evil or sin it would be too much to bear. So our unconscious defense mechanisms kick in and spare us such devastating self-reflection. It must be someone *else's* fault that things are the way they are: difficult, expensive, uncertain... that eggs cost so much, that I can't afford a house, that my masculinity is in question, that the world seems so chaotic and unreliable now.... It isn't my fault! I'm the good one! It must be... *them* that are at fault!

So, we find a scapegoat – an individual or community, perhaps a concrete person but just as likely some abstract caricature of a person or community – and sometimes there's some plausible rationale, some reasoning that is good enough to paper over our emotions. The reasoning is usually ridiculously thin and circumstantial and even illogical or self-contradictory, but none of that matters. We *want* to believe that that goat is somehow really to blame and that expelling it can somehow make everything right. We want it so much that we don't really follow the logic of the argument. It isn't about logic anyway – it is an emotional reaction to feelings we fear to acknowledge. We find someone to blame and blame away, and oh it feels so good. It's like a drug, we are willing to do almost anything, accept almost anything to keep feeling this way, so good to finally have a reason for the way things are, for the present difficulties to not be about me and my worth or safety, for the tribe's ire and violence to be directed safely somewhere else – at someone else. That is a seductive strategy... because it plays on deep, deep fears... and it is so easy to fall for.

I suspect that most people listening to this have probably already made the connection. Trump and the Republicans leaned heavily into scapegoating. Illegal immigrants are responsible for it being difficult to get a good-paying job, or Biden is responsible for the economy, or transgender persons are responsible for you feeling like the world is changing too fast and feels crazy or like you don't know what is going on anymore. And it is so seductive you don't even realize what's happening. It works because it is so much a part of how we operate as human beings in community.

It isn't fair. It isn't true. It is, when you look at it from the outside, as ridiculous as a village thinking a goat can bear their sins and carry them off into the wilderness so no one is at fault for how things are and everything is fine. (Of course, they'll need to do it again next year, because the goat really didn't change things at all.) It is crazy. But from the inside, it *feels* real, and it feels good to have that goat or illegal immigrants or transgender athletes bear the responsibility for our insecurities or struggle – that way my insecure position doesn't say something about *me*. I am still worthy of love and inclusion and protection and prestige, even if my circumstances are difficult, because my circumstances are the illegal immigrants' fault, not mine. All we need to do is get rid of the illegal immigrants and everything will be fine! I will vote for the candidate who will get rid of them, then everything will be good again and reflect my essential goodness and worthiness! Or the country will reflect all of our goodness, so we can all see how good we really are again! Make America Great Again is really: make us feel special again!

I think, for most of us, it is pretty easy to see scapegoating in the political rhetoric and policies and strategies of Trump and Republicans. It isn't hard – it is pretty flagrant sometimes.

But, recognize what I've been doing, and perhaps how easy it was for you to agree with me. I've been laying on Donald Trump and the Republicans the responsibility for all the darkness in our country, the racism and bigotry, the ignorance and cruelty, the presumption and projection. *They're* the ones doing the scapegoating! It's *their* fault! *They* have ruined this country – they're the ones with the Nazi propaganda at their heart, they're the ones making uninformed or misinformed decisions.

I have been making myself feel better about myself by locating all the darkness on them, and appealing here in this podcast to you, my enlightened and compassionate sistren and brethren and kin

of all good kinds. In some ways, I've been holding their weakest parts against my strongest, or even imagining that there is a "they" to begin with. All of it mobilized in an attempt to treat the deep disease I feel and free me from responsibility for it. I'll take responsibility for this now: to some degree, *I've been scapegoating.*

Now, a note of humility here, too. I may be right, at least on some points or to some extent. I *do* think Trump and the Republicans have enlisted unjustified fears and fantastic rationalizations that mobilized some deep and widespread and misplaced insecurities. To me, from the outside, it is pretty clear that Trump and the Republicans *have* been scapegoating. I don't know that pointing it out would make any difference – as I said, scapegoating is incredibly hard to recognize from the inside and there is every emotional, psychological, and political incentive from the inside to *not* see it. Let me be clear, I do think scapegoating is an important lens with which to understand the past two years of political and cultural activity. But....

I also recognize that it is hard to see from within, so it is important for me to pause and check myself for these biases, too. For instance, if I take a moment, I can recognize that I have created a monolithic "them" and tried to diagnose their communal pathology, even though I know that they are all individuals with their own minds and concerns. And I have assumed that they knew what they were voting for, which may not be the case – at least consciously. In fact, in conversations with Trump-voters since the election, I haven't yet found a Trump-voter who actually knew even basic facts about Trump, his character or projected policies, his criminal convictions and so on. Perhaps the best that can be said is that they were willfully ignorant. (See how quickly this descends into "look how stupid they are," tearing them down in order to make myself feel better? Argh, this programming runs so deep, it is automatic.)

This is what I mean by taking some time for soul-searching. There will be lots of time for righteous struggle and speaking truth to power and defending the vulnerable in our communities, and that's all very important. But right now may also be an opportunity to explore the shadow side of ourselves rising up to meet us in this social moment.

If you're game for this kind of introspection, you might start by identifying what angers you most about Trump or Trump-supporters right now. Not what you fear the most, or what saddens you; those are fine feelings to be aware of, but with them it is sometimes harder to recognize the shadow. What makes you *mad*?

And then, once you have that in mind – or even in your body, or maybe just start to have an impression of – ask yourself: Where in my life have I had that same thing? Where have you felt the same or similarly? When have you acted or reacted or thought or felt that yourself?

And don't let yourself off the hook too easily. Remember, it is so easy to want to make that goat *really* the one at fault here. This exercise will probably require you to think some pretty unkind things about yourself, or look for qualities that contradict your image of yourself or that are the "wrong" things to think or feel. Let that be ok. You're not performing for anyone. You are ok. You are safe. You are loved. There are parts of all of us that we hide away or deny or repress or shove down because they're not the right thing to say or be or do. It is easy to say things like "I'm not a racist" or "I don't hate people" or "I don't vote out of fear" or "I don't believe stupid lies from people who are obviously trying to manipulate me." And it feels good to believe those confirmations of our essential goodness! That's why we say them to ourselves, right? We do not say them to make factual claims – we say them to feel good in that moment. Just now, however, allow yourself to be deeply unsettled; do not turn to the easy projection onto others of a deep, spiritual question about yourself.

A recent client was walking with me through some of these questions. They described the profound confusion at what our country has shown itself to be, that we would chose an open, unrepentant bully, convicted rapist and liar, an obvious criminal and thug, corruption on an

unimaginable scale, someone openly committed to their own dangerous whims over and against the Constitution or the notion of freedom, justice, expanding rights, and so on. This client, an older person now, articulated that they had grown up and lived their life believing implicitly that our country was built on a trajectory of progress, that things get better, that we are slowly making our world better than it has been. Not perfectly, of course. Not all at once. But, generally, that our country was progressing, that we were gradually becoming kinder, more caring, more peaceful and accountable, more fair and just... in a word, better. This implicit belief in our community had seen this client through difficult times and provided a bedrock of hope through it all. We are different than the worst we can imagine.

After all, we learn about Hitler and the Nazis in *contrast* to ourselves. We study the Civil Rights Era and are gobsmacked that anyone could be so loathsomely prejudicial. To the extent that we learn about the history of laws and rights, we study them to understand how easily self-interest and corruption can warp institutions meant to protect vulnerable people. Astute teachers might even point out that the very ideas that institutions *should* protect vulnerable people or that vulnerable people should be protected had to be invented – and aren't we lucky to live on this side of that incredibly common-sensical conclusion?

We *do* tell ourselves that we are better than our forebears. After all, we have vaccines and cellphones and garbage collection and light bulbs and the internet and the Bill of Rights – we are clearly smarter than those in the past, as if the past is just one long dark age. Remember the implication that our circumstances say something real about us: we are smarter, better, valuable, beloved, blessed.... Part of why we tell this story is to make ourselves feel better about ourselves.

In this discussion with my client, it wasn't hard to find a deep disturbance in Trump's election. The political outcome brings that worldview to a crashing halt. It was all a lie. We are not getting better – there's nothing about us that means we will always expand rights, protect vulnerable people, care for children and others, be wise or smart or judicious or fair. We simply cannot believe in that myth anymore. In the same way Germans at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century believed themselves to be the pinnacle of global culture and refinement but voted in the Nazis and the holocaust and were barbarous beyond imagining. We are seeing that our country is a violent, short-sighted, vengeful, dangerous, place. As a species, as a people, as individuals, we have learned nothing. We are no better than the worst we have imagined humanity to be. The brutal, medieval darkness is still all around us.

This isn't a unique or spectacular insight, of course. If we haven't said it explicitly, we have surely felt it. This moment is made for projection: how can we make Republicans responsible for all this evil – how can we make Republicans something other than *real* Americans, other than us, so we can still feel good about ourselves, even as our civilization is a dumpster fire of incivility and horror. Or... Instead of rushing to the palliative elixir of scapegoating, could we learn something about ourselves?

Can we ask ourselves how it benefits us to have the Republicans and Trump be the ones on whom we heap all the responsibility for our naked greed, ignorance, violence, and injustice? Perhaps, if our country was not the good, progressing community that we had believed it to be, that means that *we*, 'the good ones,' as individual members of this body politic, are not necessarily progressing, not getting better, not more loving or just or fair. If we are Americans and Americans really are what we have shown ourselves to be in this election, then even *we* are as capable of horror and barbarism and racism as we have pictured Germans being in the 1930s and 40s. (Or, perhaps even worse, the Nazis were not as bad as we think – that there really were some very fine people on both sides, and what does it mean about me that I would think that, identify with the Nazis, feel sympathy or kinship with them? I shudder to think of it.) Whatever our personal faults, as Americans we could take some measure of solace, or even pride, in knowing that, as a whole, we were good people, so we as individuals are good people, or at least mostly are, just because we are Americans. We are supposed to be the good guys!

However, with our country now as nakedly vicious as any autocracy in the world, the appeal to our collective goodness has evaporated. We are not necessarily the good guys.

Before rushing headlong into self-reflection, lest we let it be another form of ego-building for our endangered self-image, let us get real and go one step further. Keeping in mind the irrational but persistent (preconscious) presumption that our circumstances implicitly tell us something about who we ‘really’ are, let us consider the consequences of Trump’s election and our national embrace of brutality, corruption, and self-interest. If that is who we are – and who I am by virtue of being an American – if the world is getting worse, it is our responsibility, our fault... *my* fault, *my* responsibility. Allow me to explain.

Whereas, earlier, I didn’t have to really *do* anything in order to take credit for the moral advances of my civilization. I didn’t participate in the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests or Civil Rights marches of the 1960s, but I could feel proud about MLK from the comfortable distance of decades, and I could put up a BLM sign in my yard, and feel good about myself because the collective was getting better, was doing the work. I could enjoy a little moral credit for it, because I was a part of our country. It wasn’t conscious, of course. It was implied. The unconscious syllogism went like this: Americans are getting less racist, and I am an American, therefore I am overcoming racism. Or something like that.

But now, with racism on public display, I cannot as easily turn away from the unacknowledged impulses of white-supremacy inside myself. Before, I could long for our nation’s adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment, but now I am left with my own implicit masculinist and patriarchal tendencies. Almost every day I drive by homeless encampments or panhandlers and most of the time drive right on by. I am compassionate for a moment, but it doesn’t last long. I have to face the fact that I have done very little of anything real to end homelessness in my own community, let alone the world. Every day I decry militarism and violence but every single day I get mad at someone inside myself – and while it doesn’t come to blows, I taste a little of that bitterness and de-personalization. I oppose the racism and prejudice of the characterization of illegal immigrants that Trump and Republicans have done, but I also know that I think shameful things of others at times based on their skin color, before my right mind can take over and drive the beast of my own implicit assumptions back into the dark. I hate the mainlining of sexual assault that is happening with the elevation of Donald Trump, but surely my feelings are fueled in part by some fear that since I have looked at a woman with lust or as an object in my life, that I hold a measure of that same guilt, black mark, sin.

I could blame others, but I’m tired of that. And the better part of me knows scapegoating some other person or community won’t change anything about me, anyway. For however violent, racist, misogynistic, and unjust the policies and rhetoric of Donald Trump and the Republicans are... what might be the most deeply upsetting thing is no longer being able to think so highly of myself, as I did when I could believe the country was good, or good enough, or at least getting better. What hurts most, perhaps, in a selfish, unconscious way, is that this election has taken from me the image of my country as a good place, as a community or collective that is always getting better. I cannot look to ‘the nation’ to support any measure of my goodness, my worthiness, my upholding of justice.

So, there it is. I’ve confessed to my worst, or at least close enough. You get the idea. There are parts of me that feel so vile that having Republicans in power just reminds me of how unlovable those parts are, how much I am unlovable for them being a part of me.

But here I am, scapegoating again. Those *Republicans*, *all* of them, as if they’re all one monolithic badness. Even Donald Trump, whom I do not know personally, I am quick to assume the worst about him. (Granted, he gives me plenty to work with in that regard.) When I am calm, I am sure his mother loved him, or could have. In all honesty, I do not know any Republican who is *only* a Republican. I don’t personally know any Republican who isn’t *also* a good person, for the most part. Most Republicans I know – despite how they voted and despite the worst of Republican policy and

rhetoric – I could trust to care about my kids if they were in the same room with them. Herein lies the challenge.

Forgive me for quoting a line from the Bible. (I am not saying you should consider it because it is in the Bible – I think it says something important and true... it just happens to be in the Bible.) Paul, in his letter to friends in Ephesus, encouraged them to speak the truth in love. That seems like pretty good advice.

We need to speak truth to power. Perhaps especially in the coming several years. There are truths we need to speak and stand for and protect. But I need to speak whatever the truth is *in love*. Because, if I am not speaking out of love, or in love, or with love, then chances are I'm speaking out of anger, judgment, condemnation, or worse: weaponizing the "truth" to make my point – to make myself feel better or to make other people feel worse. In a word, scapegoating.

Two things are important here: to make sure that I am not scapegoating, and *also* that I am not abandoning whatever good impulses and accountability I have in me. Now more than ever (perhaps), I need to engage the powers that be and stand for what is right, just, and loving. I cannot ignore my own responsibility in making the world my children inherit. The only way I can see right now to do that is I need to both speak the truth *and* speak it in love. I can only do *that* if I am not trying to make someone else take responsibility for those parts I do not like about myself.

Getting to that point is hard work, and slow, and it sucks, but I don't see a way around it. I have to take the time to love even those parts of me that I have felt are unlovable, that I have driven deep enough for me to deny, so they do not have to hide or hurt any more.

So, I may be quiet for a while while I get my house in order, so to speak. I will join you on the picket line, in the protest, on the march, in the petition. I will lay my modest body on the gears of injustice. But I may be more quiet than you might have known me to be in the past... at least for a little while. There are some parts of me I have been pretty mean to for a long time, and I have amends to make.

But then, my friends, when I do speak, I hope love will win the day. At least, it will so far as I have anything to say.