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Communal Equanimity in a Gilded Age

Commentators have recently drawn parallels between the ongoing pandemic and 1918, and proposed that once we reopen, this decade will resemble the roaring 20s of the last century. I beg to differ. As a recent publication on financial history reminded - but what about the Gilded Age? It referred to the time in US history spanning from roughly the end of the Civil War through the very early 1900s. Mark Twain and Charles Warner popularized the term, "Gilded Age", using it as the title of their novel, which described an era when economic progress masked social problems and when the siren of speculation lured sensible people into foolishness. The adjective 'gilded' means covered with a thin gold veneer on the outside but not golden on the inside. It was a time when parts of the world experienced some of the fastest growth rates by economic measures, but those metrics, obscured to some extent social and the very real financial problems felt by ordinary citizens. Not surprisingly in this period of non-uniform growth, titans of the industry like John D Rockefeller came about. It was in this era of unprecedented technological innovation and economic growth that the US produced railroads, the telegraph, stock tickers, etc. However, it was also an era infamous for manipulation, corruption and monopolies.

I put it to you that it was this lack of uniformity, which contributed to the great depression and many more crises that followed thereafter. Therefore as the end of the pandemic, a brisk march towards normalisation has begun, I cannot help but wonder, how is it that we can overcome the challenges posed by not a satirized Gilded Age, but a real one. For me, we are living in a gilded age - where most measures of financial and economic success point to great prosperity, but the reality on the ground is different. I may be wrong, but let's entertain for a moment that it is the age we are living in and it is what will continue for years to come. Therefore, I am here today, to talk on the topic of Communal Equanimity in a Gilded Age. I do so, specifically because not just as Somervillians, but as members of a leading university with the privilege of working with unquestionably bright thinkers/doers, you all have an obligation to put your knowledge to use. It is no good to be in a constant state of acquisition and fail to deploy the resources (physical or intellectual) which we have acquired in making the world a better place. Finishing from Somerville and not leaving your mark on the world would be the equivalent to the brave men and women of the special forces, refusing to deploy when their help is most needed. Now, I am not suggesting for a minute that you won't - all I am saying - is when faced with tasks and challenges, don't take the easy route. Do not take the easy route, because if not you, then who? If not a Somervillian, an Oxonian, then who the difficult problems? By being members of this college which has produced great leaders, scientists and thinkers - we have taken a spot from someone else - now we must prove that we are truly worthy of the transitory privilege of being at Somerville.

Therefore, to aide in contemplation of reinforcing our personal raft to navigate the gilded age, I will offer suggestions which broadly fall under three categories:

- a. **Maintaining equanimity in disagreements:** It is clear without a shadow of a doubt that we live in a world that isn't as harmonious as we like. But, is harmony everything? I suggest that whilst it ought to be our goal - singularly striving for harmony often quashes valid disagreement and dissent that makes way for improvement, which may not all seem constructive at first sight. My heart disagrees with my mind short-cutting my exercise plan and sends instructions to try to walk an extra mile, run a little faster, bench-press a few more kilos. Similarly, in life, governments improve policy - or so you'd hope - by listening to voices of dissent from the public. Therefore, if we agree that disagreement is a necessary force of improvement, we ought to consider - have we been reacting positively to disagreement lately? Or have we been attaching our personal sense of self-worth with the validity of every position in a disagreement? Now, our college consists of well-intentioned, humble and exceptionally bright students and colleagues. Fundamentally good people. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption to make that - if you find someone disagreeing with you - perhaps you haven't quite fully understood the facts - not because you are ignorant to reality, but perhaps the point of information which makes my friends and learned colleagues disagree is simply outside the bounds of their experiences and therefore, the only way one can overcome the difference is by engaging in a discussion to understand what else might be at play. Now, that's easier said than actually done. Why? Because in order to have a genuinely sincere discussion about disagreements, we ought to be in a state of equanimity about the existence of a disagreement in the first place. Now what do I mean by equanimity? It is being at inner peace with things being the way they are. It is about acting and not reacting. It is about seeing one's self in a detached way to the physical form we all take and seeing each other in the transcendental form - as a soul wearing the uniform of the physical body we see in this 3-dimensional world, just like we wear clothes that protect our inner self.

Once we achieve that point, we begin to see ALL experiences we are having in an experimental form, where each action taken in a state, is leading to enhancement of our future actions, so we can accrue better "rewards". Let's take an extreme example - imagine you suddenly find yourself blindfolded in a dark room where there's no source of reference, other than your feelings. You have to move your body around the room to explore the space, find the door, so you can exit the dark space. It's easy to learn when the walls are made of wood, brick and cement - but if we're in an unusual room where every move hurts, or every adverse move can be fatal - then guess what, we'd stop exploring - we'd be hesitant to take a single step. We would come to accept that this darkness is the future and our existence in the unexplored dark and hopeless space, without any company, is the terminal state. The world in which we live today isn't that different - our opinions are based off of our lived experiences, which may entirely be at odds with others with whom we share similar values. If we begin punishing each other for having even entertained a thought that we disagree with, then we're paving the way to discourage them from exploring and even correcting their beliefs. We simply cannot ever close the door on disagreements and it is my sincere hope that anyone listening to me, would not judge the character or values of a person on the basis of their current opinion. Because time is transient. The moment I utter the word - now - it is no longer now, by the time I've said it, it is already the past. We must

particularly embrace anyone we disagree with and leave space for kinder discussions, that'll eventually pave the way for either me or you to change your opinion.

Sadly nowadays, we seem to disagree in groups. So the feedback loop of a sincerely holding an incorrect opinion is no longer fully registered, because we're buffered by our social capital. And over time, it leads to partisan behaviours that eventually causes the kind of instabilities we're seeing in many countries around the world.

- b. **The role of maintaining a high morale:** Until recently, Church services, going to the Temple or a Mosque were part of life. However, with continuing heterogenization of viewpoints, it appears that primarily the younger one's among us - by that I don't mean just here in the Chapel - really anyone who is a thinker, has started to see religion, spirituality and pretty much anything to do with the "great unknown" as superstition or stuff for the unscientific one's. Now let me ask you this - can you run scientific experiments on data or physical subjects you don't have access to? Let me now ask you this - do you understand everything that there is to know about our being on this planet? I believe most of us would say, no. We don't understand death and we can't even define consciousness in a robust way. So if we admit that science of our time can only take us so far and there is something we don't understand - why then are we so quick to reject historical texts that have existed for thousands of years? Now, I know that some people reject it because they find inconsistencies within it, with what they observe or think is at odds with their sense of reason. Others reject it because they don't like the preacher. Is that fair? Just because we don't like the messenger, we're not even going to keep an open mind to the primary texts? Just because you find one inconsistency in a model, we're going to discard the entire model - well, by that logic we won't have any models left in the world. I still recall my first day as a trader as a fresh undergraduate, being asked to make decisions with sums of money I never had and the first lesson my line manager taught me - *all models are wrong, some are more wrong than another at times, but would you rather walk into a dark room with a small candle or wait until the whole room is lighted up? Some models are wrong for a reason - because you aren't seeing data in a high dimensional space in which it exists.*

Using this logic, I have made my peace with the fact that - yes - there does exist an ultimate truth, which I don't have access to, and I find inconsistencies with many messengers of the said truths - but I will read them all, to see what people have been believing, preaching and passing on for generations. Because if there's one thing I know, it's that I still haven't experienced it all and with the greatest respect, neither have you.

Therefore, I hope some of you would consider giving your introspective sides another shot and consider the possibility of the unknown. Why? Because if we do that, we'd find ourselves in a group where we can seek comfort and feel emotionally buffered by faith, when reason doesn't make sense. Now before you think "Oh M's lost it, in a non-denominational Chapel, he's basically asking us to daydream and willingly let others deceive us". I ask you this - have you ever tried to convince yourself that you're capable of doing things you've either been failing at, or haven't even tried? I'll run the fastest marathon. I'll make the best music. I'll write the next best thing after Shakespear. If you can allow your heart to momentarily deceive your mind for material gains, why can't you allow historical texts established thousands of years ago to engage your mind and

evoke reactions in you, so you can consider possibilities beyond your current point of reasoning?

One might then ask: well why do I need to maintain a high sense of morale, I can navigate the world with my knowledge, powers of deductive reasoning and open mind. Yes, that's possible, but sometimes circumstances get so difficult that it's impossible to reason our way through it. And that is where what my friends in armed forces say works - the power of struggling together and cohesion of a unit. I can't speak for other countries, but that is why each regiment and battalion in India - have their own song. As this choir would know very well, singing evokes a reaction in us that enables our mind to try different parameters to re-attempt the problems we're scaling at - not very different to how we train machine learning models by - essentially - iterating through different parameters and architectures. Maintaining a high sense of morale in exceptionally trying times, is no different from how we encourage algorithms to get out of local minimas - what seems like an optimal best solution to a problem like accepting that you're helpless and explore other solutions that might be better, but require some effort like - I must keep trying.

- c. Now my third and final point, **Appreciate the positively transactional nature of the world we live in**: We are all connected, but often times we are easily bogged down with our day to day activities to the point where we forget to look at the big picture. WE start maximising our individual rewards and forget to see the transactions taking place between us and the nature. Mother nature is a great giver - she absorbs the pollution we create, in faith that if her children are polluting, then surely they'd have made a conscious decision to borrow this carbon budget for something that was urgent. Perhaps someone had to be urgently transported to a hospital, which justified driving heavy vehicles. But have we? When we decide to take a taxi to the station instead of walking - have we consciously thought about how the greatest creditor of all - mother nature would be expecting us to make the decision wisely? How about meat? Many friends and colleagues often ask me - M, are you a vegetarian because you're religious? In addition to various arguments about animal cruelty, etc, my answer is primarily around the fact that I don't consider myself worthy enough to use such an important resource from nature - flesh of another living organism to sustain myself in my individual pursuit of happiness. On days when you're having a rest - have you ever questioned, do I really need to borrow this from nature and consume this piece of meat for calories? I'm probably just going to have a good time today and not be very productive, can I not survive on produce that minimises my debt to nature? Friends, please don't misunderstand me, I am not trying to have you change your habits - I am simply offering an alternative viewpoint, that allows you to think about your relationship with the biggest community we're all part of - nature. And I trust that you'd give my suggestions - suggestions for a more equanimous society - a fair consideration.

One of the most profound realisations I had during the lockdowns, was just how wrong I was on my position of zero-tolerance policy for criminals. Many of you haven't experienced what I experienced in a strict window-less institutional quarantine in China and if you haven't left the UK in this pandemic, you'd think you have it quite tough here. If this is how it feels when governments mandate us to stay in a hotel, where all our comforts are taken care of - then I can't even begin to imagine how fellow-humans feel when their freedom is taken away for good and they're asked to spend the rest of their lives in a prison. It is not that crime must not be punished, but I hope that the lockdown's

made us appreciate the effect of losing basic freedoms a bit better and perhaps a Somervillian in the future would propose a more forgiving system. After all, no one is born a criminal - if circumstances and society makes one a criminal - then the society must fix too. We cannot take the cowardly route of handing out capital punishments because someone committed a crime. We must help our fellow-humans.

To conclude, to those students who are finishing this year - this is your Chapel Director's eight week notice, that you're about to step out into a world that'll make you choose between the right and convenient option. Make this term count, train your mind to make the hard choices. Let your training be tested. Don't look for the easy way out, take up difficult conversations and tasks with utmost sincerity and prioritise achieving long term and lasting harmony, with equanimity in disagreements.

Somerville, full speed ahead!

Thank you.