The Spiritual Wisdom of Donald Trump

By Doug McGill

Like a deranged god out of a Greek myth, who takes human form to instruct humanity by means of crazy wisdom—lest humanity destroys itself—the orange-headed, puffy-eyed, thin-skinned Donald Trump has crash-landed in our midst.

On the one hand, we obviously can’t take such a figure seriously. He’s so obviously fictional and so grossly exaggerated and outlandish. Not a character from realistic fiction but more like a Batman villain, all jowls and arched eyebrows under a surreal bouffant. His superpower is to terrorize all of Gotham with stinging short phrases—lies, insults, boasts, slander and befuddling half-truths and misdirections—that he throws down from atop his golden skyscraper.

Once upon a time, the mythical Trump sat like Zeus at a boardroom table, hurling thunderbolts—“You’re fired!”—that vaporized victims at his whim. Now his lightning bolts, all lies and bluster, and moreover known to all precisely as such, nevertheless mysteriously envelop all who hear them in paroxysms of confusion, panic and paralysis. The newspapers and TV stations of Gotham are especially vulnerable, devoting vast amounts of their time and space to divining Trump Man’s each and every venal, vindictive, hurtful and vacuous word.

Meanwhile, everyone under Trump Man runs around aimlessly. As they do, he gets on in a leisurely way with whatever agenda he chooses, whether by sitting surrounded by TV screens to watch with unhinged pleasure all the mayhem he’s causing, or enriching his family and his cronies, or whatever. It’s a great comic book scene.

But now—zooming back to reality—the comic book character, Trump Man, has actually been elected as Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States. For real. The Zeus of a TV reality show has become the most powerful man in the world. For real. So it looks like we must take Trump Man very seriously indeed now.

Or rather—a critical distinction here—we must take very seriously the electoral process by which American citizens could choose so deeply unserious and thus so truly dangerous a person as their President.

Before we all accidentally, you know, blow up the world.

It would be our doing. It might be Trump’s own tweeting fingers that push the button, but it would be we, the citizens of the United States, who had become so enthralled with the fictional Trump Man that we elected him as our real president.

Which raises the point of this piece—the spiritual wisdom of Donald Trump. Because when we mistake an illusion for reality, and then act based on our belief in that illusion,
that's a spiritual mistake. It therefore takes only one spiritual response—a deep clarity of seeing—to see reality for what it is and thus to correct the mistake of acting based on illusion.

Trump can help us immensely with that. Because, incredibly enough, among Trump’s lies and bluster, there are times when he speaks the truth with crystalline clarity. At these times, he discloses with a startling candor the source of his superpower. And he explains precisely how it is possible that a cartoon character can get elected President of the United States, and how he unscrupulously, and shamelessly, accomplished just that.

Whenever he speaks in this truthful way, it is always with a sneer of condescension as if to say, “I can actually tell you clearly and exactly what I am doing, and you will never catch on because you are so stupid. Sad!”

The key to deciphering Donald Trump and his superpower is therefore straightforward. For once, despite our strong instincts to do otherwise, we must in a disciplined way notice the times when he breaks with custom and speaks the certain truth. Then, at these times, we must take him literally at his word and adjust our own behaviors accordingly.

It’s in the application of this second step, adjusting our own behaviors accordingly, that the modifier “spiritual,” before the word “wisdom,” comes strongly into play. Because when Trump speaks the truth in this way, as we will see in examples below, he displays a level of self-understanding—even self-honesty you could say—that is breathtaking. At these moments he not only admits, but also openly celebrates and embraces, the very worst parts of his character in full awareness that this is exactly what he is doing.

Most of us don’t do that, of course. Most of us hide and are ashamed of our worst traits, such as the ways we sometimes shade the truth for our own benefit, or how we get lazy and cut corners, or are stingy and greedy, or think ill of another person when we know we shouldn’t.

But not Trump. He celebrates his moral failings and weaknesses. This shamelessness is the source of his power. When he plays these moral faults and failings back to us in his speech and actions, they come charged with the cringing fear, shame and confusion that we feel in our own lives, towards our own faults. This fearful emotional charge around his words then activates our unconscious habits of denial and distraction from facing painful and ugly truths about ourselves. That is, the very same ugly truths of human nature, and our own inner nature, that Trump is so comfortable with in himself. This comfort with his own vices, which are the common human vices of greed, hatred and delusion, is the root of his power.

We could and sometimes do pass off this style of analysis as just so much armchair psychologizing, so much Tony Soprano visiting his shrink. All in all, we call it an entertaining sidelight that is disconnected from the realities of power that ultimately
define how things happen in the world — and that therefore highlight what we need to fix, to make things better.

But to think in this way is a huge mistake. It would be just another of the infinite ways that our minds so cleverly divert our attention away from the root problem of our individual nature, which is the root problem of human suffering. This is how we constantly create our own suffering, despite our sincerest intentions to live from our highest selves and not our worst.

When this fault in our individual selves translates through the electoral process into decisions bearing on our collective survival, it becomes obvious why we need, very quickly, to take up the work that’s being described here. That is, to put aside our fear of looking very honestly at ourselves, so that we may find at a root level why we so often act against our own best wishes and highest nature. Both for our own individual good and for society’s.

In this way, finally, we may learn how to govern ourselves wisely, both individually and collectively. We may learn how to act from our innate wisdom and not from our greed; from our kindness and not from our fear.

Donald Trump can, in fact, be a faultless guide to us in this process, for at least a part of the way. He can do this by showing us with utmost clarity his own internal terrain which, since we are humans just as he is, is our own internal terrain as well.

Having been shown this terrain so clearly we need not, and we had better not, walk that terrain in the same way that Trump has chosen to walk for himself. We can take another path, and we had better take another path, than the one Trump has chosen which is based on humanity’s lowest not highest nature, on moral darkness and not light. With a higher wisdom we can choose the path that leads to harmony and not division, to peace not to war, to kindness not to casual brutality, to fearlessness instead of fear.

We’ll each need to walk this path in our own distinctive way, each drawing on whatever ethical traditions means most to us.

My own tradition is Buddhism. So let me show how in Buddhist terms, Donald Trump is an ideal spiritual teacher for this necessary change.

The Buddhist tradition counsels us to approach Trump in two ways.

First, with compassion. Second, to take him at his literal word when he explains the psychological motivations behind the political actions he took as a candidate, and promises he will now rely upon as President.

Approaching Trump with compassion, we put aside our understandable anxieties about the prospect of Trump as president. Instead, we simply view him for now as just another human being. We bring vividly to mind everything we know of Trump, especially the
words and images that come to mind of him, that he himself has carefully designed for our consumption.

Doing this, we soon realize that a person who has so avidly pursued wealth and acquisition without limit, quite obviously has a huge hole in his soul. An emotional hole that is unfillable even with gold-leafed living rooms, towering skyscrapers, a global business empire, and his face on magazine covers constantly. This might cause us to reflect for a moment: do we have such a hole in our own lives? What do we try to fill it with? What does it feel like, this black hole in our lives?

We take this step in order, just for once, this one time, to see Trump not through our fears but through our empathy for a man who so obviously is suffering, internally, terribly. It’s important that we do so not so as to feel superior to him but, rather, that we see the similarities between his own humanity and our own. This is the only ground from which we can move forward with a clear and calm mind, that is, a clear and calm enough mind to make rational decisions on how to cope with Trump.

Go just a little further now in cultivating compassion for Trump, which is, as described above, also compassion for ourselves. For example, you might bring to mind Trump’s steady stream of vindictive attacks on his imagined enemies, which preoccupies his mind even in the wee hours of the morning.

At these times, with the rest of the world asleep, Trump in his insomnia inveighs ceaselessly against beauty queens, former business partners and political foes. Surely this speaks to a sensitivity to slights so deep as to have deranged his whole being. Such a person clearly must have suffered terrible blows in his past, an extreme withholding of love and deeply scarring emotional abuse. In purely human terms, with an open heart, we recognize the reality of these wounds that have continued to cause Trump great suffering throughout his lifetime. We grieve that it happened; we wish it were not so; we wish for his suffering to stop; that he could be happy. That he could enjoy life free from his demons, knowing his innate joy.

Let’s pause for a moment now and reflect that surely, if Trump became happy in this way, by release from his own suffering, that this would equal the end of our own suffering and fear of him too. This is the very practical aim of compassion.

If we reflect in this way purely, we’ll soon notice that our consciousness has changed. Our anger, our fear and anxieties have abated for now. They have been enveloped and dissolved within a vast space of compassion. This simple spiritual practice opens a new space in our minds and hearts, within which we can start to make practical decisions for action that aren’t grounded in fear or selfishness—as they are for Trump, as he readily admits (see the examples given below). Instead we can begin to draw now on our higher innate capacities for grounded wisdom, fairness, justice, common sense.

Now we move to the second practice: listening seriously and respectfully to what Trump says, now targeting its spiritual content.
Again, Buddhism offers a helpful framework. The Buddha taught that the basic human dilemma is that humans without training are incapable of seeing reality’s essential nature. This flaw is called “delusion.” Reality is a flow of sensations, perceptions and thoughts. But humans don’t see it that way but rather, in their delusion, instead as a collection of solid objects. As a result of this flawed understanding of reality, humans mistakenly believe that grasping to certain types of inherently pleasant objects will bring us pleasure, and that avoiding or destroying objects that bring us unpleasant sensations will erase that unpleasantness and keep us safe and content.

The first of these two unskillful behaviors, believing that grasping to pleasant objects can bring us happiness, is called “greed.” The second unskillful behavior, which is the belief that violence and vengeance will keep us safe and happy, is “hatred.”

These three qualities of the human mind — delusion, greed and hatred — are in Buddhism called the “three unwholesome roots.” They are the fundamental reason why human beings create suffering for themselves instead of resting in the natural flow of experience that is full of nature’s creativity, power and intelligence.

What makes Donald Trump an excellent spiritual teacher is how openly, clearly and specifically he identifies greed, hatred and delusion as the primary ethical guidelines of his life. Moreover, he repeatedly argues they are the best way to survive and thrive in the world, not only personally but collectively through corporate and government policies and laws.

Take the case of greed. Trump is a forceful and articulate advocate of greed. At a campaign rally in Warren, Michigan, he told a cheering crowd:

“My whole life has been about taking money, right? Taking money. I take, take, take, take. I’m a businessman, that’s what I’m supposed to do. My job is to take money. My job is, in a sense, I hate to say it, to be greedy. And I’m greedy, I go like this [his arms motion a gathering in] — more, more, I want more, more, more. Now I’m going to be greedy for the United States. I’m going to be really greedy for the United States.”

We owe Trump gratitude for such clear teaching. After this, if we fail to see how an individual’s person’s vice (greed in this case) can virulently transform into collective suffering in society, that’s on us and not on him.

Trump is equally transparent about his fealty to the vices of hatred and delusion as guiding principles in his life, his business, and in government. At a Fort Dodge, Iowa rally last year, in a tone of voice that was ingratiating and imploring, he told the audience:

“I’m good at war. I’ve had a lot of wars of my own, and I’m really good at war. I love war, in a certain way.”
His surrogates later tried to spin that positively, emphasizing the phrase “in a certain way.” But there is no spinning such diamond clarity: “I love war.”

Trump elaborated on his philosophy of hate to the TV anchor, Greta Van Susteren:

“If somebody hits me, I have to hit them back. I have to. I’m not going to sit there and say, ‘I’m wonderful, I’m a president.’ I want to win. What happens is they hit me and I hit them back harder. They hit me and I hit them back harder and they disappear. That’s what we want to lead the country.”

The vice of delusion is Trump’s strongest suit. He’s a past master at using delusion to capture media attention day after day. Not because he is clarifying reality for citizens but because, just like the TV “reality show” star where he honed his delusion skills, he knows just what to say and do to keep us all on our seats in uncertainty, doubt, worry and concern.

In Buddhist terms, delusion is this very simple confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity and doubt seeded deep in the soul. It’s so deep that one continually is asking oneself what is real, what is certain, what is true? It’s the raw anxiety of life. If we see life as it really is, we are at peace with its inexorable flow, and we don’t have this anxiety. But without this skill of clear seeing, we more or less constantly are fearful of change and disruption, of something bad that’s soon to happen. Thus we always crave just a little more certainty, a little more love, money or other form of security—such as electing an authoritarian strong man as president.

The distress and the suffering of this ceaseless uncertainty, which boils down to fear, is extremely powerful. It is therefore ripe for weaponization by a genius of delusion like Trump who knows, above all, how to sow this uncertainty and how to reap its gains in the form of TV ratings, advertising eyeballs, book royalties and now an electoral college victory that has captured the Presidency of the United States.

In interviews, Trump frequently praises delusion as a business and international trade negotiation tactic, and as a foreign policy tool.

“We’re totally predictable. And predictable is bad,” Trump told a Washington Post reporter who had asked what foreign policy stance he planned. Another time he added, “We, as a nation, need to be more unpredictable.” Once, when the Fox anchor Bill O’Reilly asked Trump whether he might bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities, Trump answered: “Bill, I’m gonna do what’s right. I want to be unpredictable.”

To a Time magazine reporter who witnessed Trump watching TV for hours on his private jet, flipping from channel to channel to watch himself on show after show, Trump casually explained: “You see what this is, right? It’s ratings. I go on one of these shows and the ratings double. They triple. And that gives you power. It’s not the polls. It’s the ratings.”
On the innumerable occasions Trump explains himself in these ways, it’s almost as if he is begging us all to finally understand him. Time after time he uses extremely vivid imagery to catch our attention, to try to make us understand:

“I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters,” Trump told an Iowa rally a year ago. He is like a thief leaving clue after clue behind him, as if he unconsciously hoped finally to be caught.

All that it takes to catch Trump is to pay him the respect to listen to him carefully and take him at his word. He says he loves and lives by greed, hatred and delusion. We should believe him and act accordingly.

That will require using his hurtful provocations as a call for each one of us to take the inward journey I have described here. First, to change our consciousness with compassion. And then, out of the spacious, gracious and wise mind of compassion, to indelibly learn, and to decisively act.

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