

Morality and Michael Cohen

Wednesday's testimony and the crisis of American conscience.



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I often wonder who didn't love Donald Trump. I often wonder who left an affection void that he has tried to fill by winning attention, which is not the same thing. He's turned his life into a marketing strategy. As Michael Cohen said in his testimony on Wednesday, even the presidential campaign was a marketing campaign to build the Trump brand.

In turning himself into a brand he's turned himself into a human shell, so brittle and gilded that there is no place for people close to him to attach. His desperate attempts to be loved have made him unable to receive love.

Imagine what your own life would be like if you had no love in it, if you were just using people and being used. Trump, personifying the worst elements in our culture, is like a providentially sent gong meant to wake us up and direct us toward a better path.

Nonetheless, his kind of life has an allure for other lonely people who also live under the illusion that you can win love and respect with bling and buzz. Michael Cohen was one of these people. He testified that in serving Donald Trump he felt he was serving a cause larger than self. Those causes were celebrity and wealth.

He was like Donald Trump Jr. — living in Trump's orbit, desperate for approval, not realizing that it would never come because Donald Trump is incapable of hearing any cries except the roar of his own hungers.

Getting arrested seems to have been a good education for Cohen. He now realizes that Trump will not provide him with the sustenance he needs. I believe that Cohen basically told the truth in his testimony on Wednesday, but I don't believe that he is a changed man.

There is none of the purgation of self and transformation of spirit that happens among people who have truly been altered. He's just switched teams and concluded that the Democrats can now give him what he wants, so he says what appeals to them. That may be progress, but it is not moral renewal.

Cohen has left the Thugs for Trump club and passed that baton to certain House Republicans. I would have loved to have been in the strategy session when the House Republicans decided to be incurious about Trump's sins and crimes but to rip the skin off Cohen.

Normal people have moral sentiments. Normal people are repulsed when the president of their own nation lies, cheats, practices bigotry, allegedly pays off porn star mistresses.

Were Republican House members enthusiastic or morose as they decided to turn off their own moral circuits, when they decided to be monumentally unconcerned by the fact that their leader may be a moral cretin?

Do they think that having anesthetized their moral sense in this case they will simply turn it on again down the road? Having turned off their soul at work, do they think they will be able to turn it on again when they go home to the spouse and kids?

This is how moral corrosion happens. Supporting Trump requires daily acts of moral distancing, a process that means that after a few months you are tolerant of any corruption. You are morally numb to everything. You end up where Representative Jim Jordan blandly ended up Wednesday, in referring to the hush-money scheme: “I think it’s news we knew about.”

I’ve heard the rationalizations. This is gang warfare. We have to do everything we can to defend our team. The other team leaves us no choice. Those are the sorts of things people say to give themselves permission to yield to their venal ambitions. Those are the sorts of things rookies and amateurs say.

Professionals know that effectiveness in any realm, especially politics, depends on having some guiding and consistent integrity that people can trust, loyalty to something higher than your next appearance on Fox or MSNBC.

Here is the commandment that experience teaches us: Immorality usually bites you in the ass. If you behave in a way that betrays relationship and obliterates the truth and erases your own integrity, you will sooner or later wind up where Michael Cohen has wound up — having ruined your life.

In “East of Eden,” John Steinbeck writes: “Humans are caught — in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too — in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence. Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last. ... A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard clean questions: was it good or was it evil? Have I done well — or ill.”

That is the passage that confronts us as we decide to defend or condemn Trump. The moral drama is the central drama. Did you, at your crucial moment, side with generosity or greed?

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