



Epsilon Theory

Rust and Blight

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Suddenly, over the slope, as if tethered to a cord of air drawing quickly upward, came a Northern Harrier, motionless but for its rising. So still was the bird – wings, tail, head – it might have been a museum specimen. Then, as if atop the wind, it slid down the ridge, tilted a few times, veered, tacked up the hill, its wings hardly shifting. I thought, if I could be that hawk for one hour I'd never again be just a man.

PrairyErth: A Deep Map, by William Least Heat-Moon

This is cedar rust.

It is the effect of the fungus *gymnosporangium juniperi-virginianae* on an apple tree leaf in my orchard. This fungus has infected a particularly lovely Yarlington Mill tree that would otherwise make a rich English-style single-varietal cider.

I can slow cedar rust down.

I can spray the tree with copper or sulfur, and it'll kill some spores. I can spray the tree with something 'organic', and it'll make the spores smell like whatever 'organic' goop I sprayed them with. Neither strategy will stop them. They're in the air, on the bark and on the ground. Any leaf on this tree that has been infected with cedar rust this season will eventually curl, yellow and die. Any new leaf on the same branch will still almost certainly become infected. Even on new growth on a different branch, the prognosis isn't very good. I'll lose every leaf on this tree this season before its time.

The tree will live. But as long as the eponymous hosts for the fungus exist in the vicinity, it will be my orchard's constant companion.

I have a few choices.

I can find, uproot and burn every cedar, juniper, cypress, sugi, sequoia and redwood tree within a half-mile radius. Having seen what juniper did to turn the Central Texas plains into a desert over the last 100 years or so, I am inclined toward this idea. Regretfully, my neighbors disagree, even though the destruction of all cedar and juniper trees is both a righteous and holy crusade – and the only permanent solution to my little problem with cedar rust.

Alternatively, I can religiously apply sulfur to each and every apple tree before and following bud-break, and then follow up with copper in the late season.

But tearing up the tree and replanting a new one? Wouldn't do a thing. Cedar rust isn't a problem with the tree. It's a problem with the tree's environment.



This is fire blight.

Fire blight is, well, a blight. It isn't caused by a fungus, but by a little bacterium called *Erwinia amylovora*. Thankfully, this picture isn't from my orchard.

Fire blight is different from cedar rust. It can be controlled and prevented at some stages with many of the same chemical applications, but once you've got a canker in your wood, that wood must be removed and burned. If it emerges during the Goldilocks temperature and humidity environment of a North American summer, you'll have to cut it a foot or more inside the canker to be sure.

And if the canker is in the main leader?

Pull the trees up, root and stem. Burn them in the hottest fire you can find and use the ashes to curse your enemies. **Nuke 'em from orbit.** And with whatever you plant the next time, be sure to pay your wergild to Cornell University, which curiously owns the patents on nearly every fire blight-resistant rootstock and makes a few bucks on just about every apple tree you're likely to find at a modern orchard.

When it comes to blight, the problem is with the tree and with its roots.

How does the orchard hobbyist discern between rust and blight?

It is never easy. Sometimes a canker or growth gives you a strong hint, but the effects can otherwise be pretty similar. Browning, curling, drying of leaves. Yellow spots. These same symptoms may describe a dozen different maladies, some of which warrant patience and pruning shears, and some of which demand nothing short of fire and blood.

How does the investor and citizen discern between rust and blight?

It is never easy.

I remember the exact moment I decided to make orcharding part of my **life's work**. When my wife and I were first planning to be the only poor saps moving *to* Connecticut *from* Texas, we found a few houses we liked. We liked this one a little more than most. We thought the yard and woodlands were nice – a great place to **free range** our kids. But when we took a look inside the old red barn, we found two things: a gnarled old apple tree stump, four 19th century cider barrels and this old apple mill.



That was it. That was when we fell in love.

That was also when we decided we would plant apple trees.

It isn't that I have some long-standing thing for apples. I mean, Jesus, I know I'm odd, but I'm not "apples are my passion" odd. My favorite fruit is the blackberry. I think most American cider is insipid. But I don't understand how you can see and touch the value that generations saw in a piece of earth and come away unmoved. Unchanged.

"If I could be that hawk for one hour I'd never again be just a man."

There is a contradiction here; surely you see it. It is the wellspring of **American exceptionalism** – an idea manufactured into a meme by the right and an ironic joke by the left. We *are* an exception, but not because we are uniquely free or uniquely smart or uniquely strong. We are an exception because for most of our history we have been a frontier. We are ever torn between a cultural and personal predisposition for adventure and a yearning for deeper connection. I moved my family half-way across the country, away from every root we'd ever sunk into that deep red clay, only to find a 150-year old barrel with a painted-on family name I felt obliged to honor. And for Americans, *that* story is decidedly *unexceptional*. It is the kind of story a hundred million families could tell.

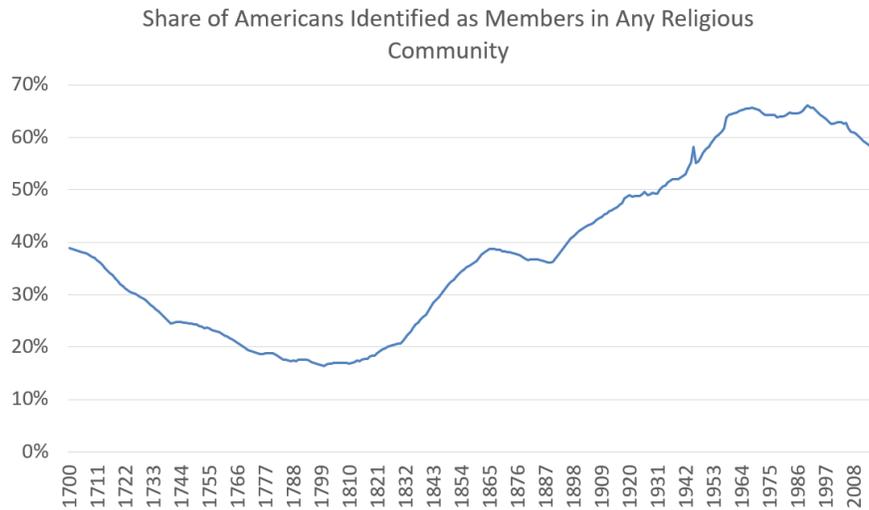
What is the thread which ties those stories together? The escape to and civilization of a frontier.

If you, like my 7th or 8th (or whatever) great-grandfather, arrived in the early-to-mid 18th Century from an Irish port, you probably landed in Philadelphia or Wilmington. You were probably poor and probably indentured for some period to pay for the voyage. Once you were able, you found the lands around Philadelphia full and far too expensive. And so you took to the road west toward what is now Harrisburg or Lancaster, where Swiss Anabaptists fleeing an unfriendly religious environment and Palatines fleeing nearly constant French incursions into the Rheinland had already settled. And so, by wagon or horse, you followed the curve of the Shenandoah Valley into the James River Valley and all down the spine of the Appalachians.

No matter when you came, you kept going until you found the frontier.

It was always moving. Before 1750, the frontier was the backwoods of Virginia. In the 1760s or 1770s it was probably in North Carolina (my dear wife thinks I should make an *Outlander* reference here, but I have informed her that would be very off-brand). In the 1780s and 1790s, that frontier shifted to what is now Northeast Tennessee, where the Tennessee River and the lands lying before the Cumberland Gap opened entirely new worlds to most European settlers. Alabama, Mississippi. Kentucky. Indiana. Missouri. In the coming decades, the breach of the Appalachians meant that the frontier's race westward would accelerate.

The most popular and enduring myth about these early pioneers – especially among my fellow Tocqueville-loving conservatives – is that they were an especially pious people, bringing civilization, godliness and order to the untamed country. What a laugh. As Lyman Stone correctly points out, they were **drunks and heathens all**, by which I hope you understand that I mean no criticism. These were *my kind of people*. The settling of the frontier was a *demonstrable* rejection of established cultural norms, established social structures and entrenched power. *Of course* it was. *Y'all*, that was sort of the point of the whole affair.



Source: Lyman Stone

And yet.

Despite the fundamental small-l liberalism of frontier expansion, in each of these new communities, duty to fellow-laborers quickly became sacred and indispensable. Naturally, this took different forms in different places and with different people. But the pattern is recognizable in nearly every frontier town. Citizens realize that they needed someone who could marry them. Someone to share the burden of teaching children. Someone to shoe a horse. Someone to judge a dispute between two neighbors. Someone who could be trusted to lock up citizens who'd been hitting the cider too hard. They also needed to know that the people around them could be roused to selfless, communal action if their community was under threat.

Civilization emerges. Conservatism follows when people conclude that they'd like to keep the things they've found.

Of course, not every American had the luxury of simply working off an indenture to make whatever they could of the world. Nearly 4 million Americans whose mothers and fathers lived for centuries under the vile institution of chattel slavery were forced to wait until its abolition. And yet theirs is perhaps the most powerful frontier story of all – navigating at once a new, unfriendly and unfamiliar country, and in conquering it discovering and creating one of the most culturally cohesive – and yes, in its own way, conservative – communities in the world.

And that's a good thing. No, that's an *exceptional* thing – and essentially human.

Every great achievement, every great leap, every great advance we have made as a species is the result of small-l forces of liberalism and heterodoxy braving new ideas and new shores. AND it is the result of small-c conservatism and the successful institutionalization of orthodoxy around those new ideas alongside those that came before that *worked*.

The **Long Now**, well, it usurps and perverts them both. In the Long Now, we are **helicopter parents and helicopter policymakers**. In the Long Now, we create memes of *liberalism!* out of whole cloth in place of real frontiers, and memes of *values!* and *conservatism!* to defend not Lindy-proven ideas, but sources of

existing power and influence. Want to know why we have a world that *looks fair but feels foul*? A world where present valuations of the future look great, but true expectations of the future feel lousy?

Tell me, where today is small-l liberalism and heterodoxy permitted from within? Do you think that you will find it in financial markets, where the very act of positing that maybe – just maybe – the job of a professional investor might involve judging the value of an asset being purchased in comparison to another has become a kind of heresy? Do you think you will find small-l liberalism among American progressives, where wholesale embrace of deplatforming and cancel culture will damn you and your ideas for all time because you were an ignorant dumbass when you were 16? Do you think you'll find small-l liberalism among American conservatives, where opposition to Dear Leader will lead to **your banishment** and excommunication, regardless of the consistency of your political views?

Tell me, where today is good-faith orthodoxy not under assault from without? Is there a view about the public sphere it is possible to hold which has not made the transition in some group's common knowledge from *disagreement* to *dangerous*? As utterly unacceptable, worthy of our derision, our strongest rhetoric and treatment as an existential threat to everything we love? *Within* these tribes of little meaning we have allowed to consume us, we handle every disease like rust, something to be pruned and treated, but gently. Kindly. *Outside* these tribes of little meaning we treat every disease like blight, burning and ripping indiscriminately.

There is but one end-game: a sparse field of dying trees, lovingly tended and violently defended.

Thankfully, in our own lives, careers and communities, we get to choose what we labor to heal and prune, and what we throw on the bonfire so that we may plant anew.

I'm with Ben. Even though we disagree on health care and health insurance. On abortion. On tax policy and the justifiable role and interest of the state in managing wealth inequality. On a great many things. We are not 'political allies' in any recognizable American sense. But national politics and national parties are a blight, and they will be a blight so long as they perpetuate their control through manipulation of existential narratives. I've ripped them from my orchard. Will I vote? Probably. Do I care who wins? Probably. I like Gorsuch. I'd like more Gorsuchs. But my energy, my time, my wealth – such as they are – cannot belong to this painstakingly designed foreverwar of Flight 93 Elections.

News media is a blight, too. That doesn't mean that there aren't earnest, good people working to inform us. There are thousands – tens of thousands! A free press is, properly arranged, among the single most important institutions to the defense of liberty! However, the decision of the major outlets and their owners to fuse and gray the lines between news, analysis, feature and opinion journalism has made them vessels for fiat news and agents of the widening gyre. So yes, I think we *should* demand that legitimate news organizations, both left and right, exit the opinion and analysis business. Full stop. They won't. Fostering the widening gyre via social media was the discovery that finally made this terrible business model modestly profitable for some outlets. And so it falls to us to determine the role they will play in how we inform ourselves, in our orchard. My vote, again, is for the bonfire.

What about other institutions, like our universities, our churches, temples, mosques and synagogues? Our system of laws, our intangible institutions and collective social values like home ownership, families, volunteerism, charity, patriotism and social mobility? There's some pruning that needs to be done. Some branches in need of culling. But as marvelous as **the really thoughtful Derek Thompson's piece in The Atlantic** was, I'm among those not yet willing to consign any of these things to flames of woe in hopes of some new stabilizing cultural institution taking their place.

Yet in all these things, what matters most is what we lose if we embrace the Long Now and the widening gyre.

What we lose is the ability and appetite to take risk.

“Adrianus (Hadrian) was passing on his way to Tiberias when he saw a very old man digging holes preparatory to planting trees. Addressing the old man, he said: ‘I can understand you having worked in your younger days to provide food for yourself, but you seem to labour in vain at this work. You can surely not expect to eat of the fruits which the trees, that you intend planting, will bring forth?’

‘I’ said the old man, ‘must nevertheless do my duty as long as I am able to do it.’

‘How old are you?’ asked Adrianus.

‘I am a hundred years old,’ replied the planter, ‘and the God who granted me these long years may even vouchsafe me to eat of the fruit of these trees. But in any case I do not grudge the labour on them, and as it pleases the Lord so He may do with me.’”

Leviticus Rabbah (5th to 7th Century)

Common knowledge will tell you that the real question is which national party and candidate you will support with your whole heart to stave off the coming existential threat, whatever that might be. I tell you that the real question is this: Who are you willing to take risk for, and who are you willing to protect – emotionally, morally and financially – when *they* take risk?

Maybe it's just your immediate family.

Maybe it's three or four neighbors. Or a couple very close friends.

Maybe it's fellow laborers in local union.

Maybe it's a small group from your place of worship.

Maybe it's a small group of business partners, people with whom you've shared both wins and losses, successes and failures.

Maybe it's a community separated by distance and united by technology, a collection of like-minded people willing to call themselves something.

Whatever that thing is for you, that's your pack. Or at least it can be. **We can Make.** Every ounce of effort we would otherwise devote to defending blight can be devoted to taking new risks on new ideas, new investments and new creations. **We can Protect.** Every ounce of energy and time we muster to defend memes of our beliefs against all comers can be devoted to supporting our fellow-laborers when they fail. **We can Teach.** Every ounce of exhaustion that is poured into trying to signal our adherence to the Right Ideas can instead be poured into growing together intellectually, physically, emotionally, technologically, socially and culturally with our pack.

We may not succeed. But we will not grudge the labor.



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