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The fever swamp

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This has been a year of sadness and despair. I'm among the lucky ones who haven't lost family members to the virus, though I've lost friends and acquaintances.

Of the many things that have occurred in 2020, one of the saddest for me has been seeing a number of people I considered stable and relatively well educated sink into the fever swamps of social media as they peddle conspiracy theories and lash out angrily at those with whom they disagree.

A few of these people have been on the far left. But, as you might imagine in a state that went overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in last month's presidential election, most are on the far right. Like members of a cult, they bought into the Trump mantra during the previous four years and weren't about to let the facts intrude.

How did they allow this to happen to themselves? They are all people, I suspect, who spend far too much time watching cable talk shows and reading political stories on their phones. This has become their twisted form of entertainment. Their daily habit is to get worked up by things over which they have no control.

In many cases, these are people who once actually read books, attended civic club meetings and talked with neighbors about their children and the weather rather than politics.

At one time, their Facebook pages were filled with photos of grandchildren and flowers from their gardens. Now, those same pages feature hateful memes and stories shared from disreputable websites.

These people once went fishing, hunting and hiking rather than having an appointment each evening with Tucker Carlson. I want to scream: "Chill out, quit worrying about Washington, and focus on that which is local, the things you can actually control."

Try starting your day by brewing a good pot of coffee and reading a reputable newspaper or two rather than picking up that phone and going to websites with clear political agendas. When you get home from work in the evening, try turning off the cable "news" channels so you can read a book.

Ditch the phone for long stretches on weekends, pour a cup of hot tea, put on classical music or jazz in the background, and finish that book you've been plodding through on weeknights.

Plant a garden this spring. Rediscover the joy of sports and rooting for your favorite teams. Become active in your church again as soon as the pandemic ends. Join the Kiwanis, Lions or Rotary Club. Join a book club.

Get out in the Arkansas outdoors and enjoy all this state has to offer. Make day trips to places you haven't visited before. Reconnect with your family. Realize that there's so much more to life than politics.

Be far more selective when it comes to what you listen to and read. If you respect yourself, you'll realize that your time is valuable. Why waste it on those outlets that are trying to sell you something, get you to contribute to a political cause, or participate in a scam?

For years, those on the political left loved to demonize business tycoon Charles Koch. The man Forbes says is the 15th-wealthiest person in the country now says the last thing the country needs is more division.

"At age 85, he says, he is turning his attention to building bridges across partisan divides to find answers to sprawling social problems such as poverty, addiction, recidivism, gang violence and hopelessness," Douglas Belkin wrote about Koch last month in *The Wall Street Journal*. "His critics are skeptical, noting that his fierce Republican partisanship over the years blew up a lot of bridges."

Koch, however, said he now regrets that partisanship.

In a new book titled "Believe in People: Bottom-Up Solutions for a Top-Down World," Koch writes: "Boy, did we screw up! What a mess!"

Koch told Belkin that the key to successful long-term movements is uniting "a diversity of people behind a common goal. That's our approach today."

"Koch and his late brother David seeded the political landscape with conservative and libertarian ideas, then built an infrastructure to nurture them," Belkin wrote. "Koch-aligned ventures fund more than 1,000 faculty members at more than 200 universities, helped bankroll think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, and supported the American Legislative Exchange Council (a nonpartisan organization of similarly minded state legislators) to write bills that were introduced and championed by Republican state lawmakers across the country."

"We did not create the Tea Party," Koch told Belkin. "We shared their concern about unsustainable government spending, and we supported some Tea Party groups on that issue. But it seems to me the Tea Party was largely unsuccessful long term, given that we're coming off a Republican administration with the largest government spending in history."

Unlike most other Republicans, Koch was quick to congratulate the winning ticket.

"I congratulate Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on their victory," he said. "I look forward to finding ways to work with them to break down the barriers holding people back, whether in the economy, criminal justice, immigration, the covid-19 pandemic or anywhere else. At the same time, I hope we all use this post-election period to find a better way forward. Because of partisanship, we've come to expect too much of politics and too little of ourselves and one another."

In an article headlined "The Violent Style" in the Nov. 16 issue of The New Yorker, Evan Osnos wrote: "Part of America's predicament is that its political parties magnify the intensity of factions rather than negotiating toward a compromise. Ideally, parties pull people into blocs that help bridge their racial, religious and professional differences; it gives them an alternative collective identity. America's parties do precisely the opposite: they compound and amplify the differences."

Bill Moyers once said in a speech about evangelical politics: "One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal."

Or as Susan Jacoby wrote in her 2008 book "The Age of American Unreason": "America is now ill with a powerful mutant strain of intertwined ignorance, anti-rationalism and anti-intellectualism."

I see the symptoms of that illness each day on my social media feeds. And it makes me sad when I see such traits in people I knew before they were ill.

"Trump made the invention of reality a central doctrine of his government," Osnos wrote. "He installed a 60-inch television in his dining room and was said to spend as much as eight hours a day watching cable news (Trump denies this). He often ambled into unfamiliar facts; he suggested that Frederick Douglass was still alive ("getting recognized more and more"), congratulated Poland on the anniversary of its invasion by the Nazis and pronounced Yosemite to rhyme with Vegemite, the Australian breakfast spread.

"Because of his aversion to reading intelligence briefings, aides resorted to showing him pictures and homemade movies. Linguists who assessed his spoken vocabulary found that he used the most primitive language of any of the last 15 presidents (Herbert Hoover was ranked the most sophisticated). According to the standard measure of complexity in writing, the Flesch-Kincaid index, Trump communicated at the level of a fourth grader."

Unfortunately, what once was merely sad sometimes became dangerous.

"Week by week, as Trump raged against problems beyond his aptitude to address, he leaned ever more on the language and the symbolism of force--a mode of expression that might be called the violent style," Osnos wrote.

Hopefully, things will improve in 2021 with Trump gone. Still, turning off the television and phone so I can tend to that spring garden is starting to look better and better.