



EXTENDED REVIEW ESSAY

Healing and Re-imagining the United States in the Time of Trump

The Depolarization of America: A Guidebook for Social Healing by Kirk J. Schneider, University Professors Press, Colorado Springs, Colo., 2020, ISBN 978-1939686633, price (paperback) \$21.95; and *Re-Imagining America: Finding Hope in Difficult Times* by Christopher Schaefer, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, Glos, 2019, 200 pp, ISBN 978-1-907359-96-5, index, price (paperback) £15.00

By **Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D.**

I found Kirk Schneider's (2020) book *The Depolarizing of America: A Guidebook for Social Healing* and Christopher Schaefer's (2019) book *Re-Imagining America: Finding Hope in Difficult Times* to be effectively enhancing each other in their respectively powerfully impactful expositions of their main themes. Schneider's strength is in his pragmatic hands-on Experiential Democracy work for facilitating dialogue between people with intensely polarized social and political beliefs.¹ On the other hand, Schaefer's strength is in his insightful and extensive analysis of the social, political, economic, psychological, and spiritual forces that have shaped a multitude of malevolent events in both the history of and current times in America, while also presenting an uplifting personalized and spiritual social/economic/political means of overcoming these malevolent forces.² The approach I adopt in this review essay is to provide apposite

extended quotations, so that the voices of the authors under review come through loud and clear, and thus elucidating the books' themes that particularly interested this reviewer.

From my perspective, Schaefer's extensive description of the relevant social, political, and economic forces that have shaped many of the unsavory elements of America are an important addition to Schneider's focus on one-on-one interpersonal dialogue to reduce polarization; and likewise, Schneider's Experiential Democracy depolarization dialogue work is an important means of putting into concrete practice some of the idealistic suggestions that Schaefer described in his essays when he writes of the potential for reconnection and relationships with others.

However, although I certainly greatly appreciate and value both Schneider's Experiential

Democracy work and Schaefer's penetrating and extensive analysis of the malevolent forces that have shaped America coupled with his inspiring possibilities for a remedy, I believe that there are some important factors that need to be addressed more than either author has done, in order to gain a more complete and accurate understanding of what is going on here. I will include these factors more extensively in the final section of this review essay, but for now I will say that I believe the factors of cult indoctrination, and social media manipulation and addiction, stemming directly from US (now former) President Donald Trump are key elements that may help round out the picture of both the polarization and the malevolent forces that have shaped, and are currently shaping, life in America.³

Schneider's *Depolarization of America*

Kirk Schneider presents an idealistic and pragmatic approach that he has been using for a number of years for facilitating constructive dialogue between people with intensely polarized social and political beliefs. Schneider's approach is based on his previous work on awe,⁴ but for the past few years he has been applying his work on awe as a basis to start working through the massive polarization that we have been witnessing in America. Schneider (2020) conceptualized awe in terms of 'fullness and sublimity', which he described as follows (with italics included in all quotations in this review essay as the authors used them):

Fullness and sublimity have two major features – first, a daunting or *humbling* quality, and second, an intriguing or *wondering* quality. These humbling and wondering qualities form a rich tapestry of related aspects from dread to thrill and from veneration to boldness. (p. 6)

With regard to Schneider's (2020) application of awe to healing the polarization in America, he conveys an inspiring idealistic framework:

This sense of awe has the potential to transform every major sector of our lives, from the way we treat our fellow humans to our relationship to nature, to our engagements at work, to our deliberations in governance, to our freedom as individual and social beings.... The sense of awe can draw together the most divided thinkers, ideologues, and ethnicities; stretch across townships and cities, farmlands and seacoasts, countries and continents.... [Awe] is *foundational* to democracy. It is foundational to the value a democratic people place on life; the maturity level of such people; the meaning such people attain in their personal lives, which impacts the meaning people attain in their collective lives; and it is foundational to people's capacities for freedom – to wonder and to discover – as well as their capacities to support others' pursuit of freedom. (p. 78)

Furthermore, Schneider describes his belief in the powerful potential of awe to heal the destruction caused by the political polarization and threats to democracy through 'potential excesses':

The cultivation of awe for life can also serve as a check on democracy – namely, its potential excesses.... It becomes a hedge against the fanaticisms and idolatries that have plagued democracies past.... The awe for life is acutely attuned to human limitations and the need to be vigilant about those limits, lest awe mutates into presumption. In short, the awe for life is a basis for trust in people to run their own society and to curb their tendency to trust in false purveyors of awe, like leaders and institutions that promise the world but deliver illusions, or worse, tyranny. (p. 8)

Some of the nuts-and-bolts ingredients that Schneider utilizes in his Experiential Democracy depolarization dialogue include the following:

Abandon expectations of changing the other's core beliefs and attitudes.... Follow the Core Principles that respect, curiosity, and openness tend to elicit the same from the other person.... That everyone needs to save face – and that no one is portrayed as stupid, blind, narrowly self-serving or bigoted – that most people in a relationship have common values and concerns that can be unearthed.... Set a constructive tone, meaning draw from a perspective of genuine curiosity rather than one of entrapping or belittling; remember that it's not just what you say but *how* you say it that can have the largest impact.... Listen in a way that the other person feels heard. For example, take a position of humility; make every effort to 'put yourself in the other's shoes': paraphrase the other's essential points when called for. (pp. 22–3)

I certainly applaud Schneider for his valuable Experiential Democracy work to depolarize America through caring and constructive dialogue, and I think his work exemplifies the basic core values of Humanistic Psychology, as originally formulated by Carl Rogers (1961). However, I also have a number of concerns about the realistic widespread potential of Schneider's Experiential Democracy work being able to effectively heal the horrific depolarization that American is currently going through. First off, the two Experiential Democracy participants whose dialogue is featured in the text of the book, and illustrated in the cover of the book, who Schneider describes as an African American activist and a White police officer, are both highly accomplished humanistic psychologists with Ph.D.'s in psychology who were already on friendly terms with each other. Consequently, they are highly atypical of the multitude of polarized Americans who would need to participate in this project for

widespread effective depolarization to take place. Thus, as Schneider readily acknowledges:

Nathaniel and Rodger were both mental health professionals in addition to their other roles exhibited in the dialogue, and they both had prior acquaintance with each other. This latter point is important because it means that these two dialogue partners may not be representative of partners who are completely unknown to each other.... Second, the participants were comparatively more psychologically minded than many other participants I've worked with, which enabled them to engage with comparatively less structure, guidance, and support. (pp. 38–9)

However, these two professional humanistic psychologist participants both conveyed that they experienced significant and authentic value from participating in this dialogue, and Schneider gives a plausible explanation for viewing these participants as part of a pilot project, with possibilities for more broadly expanding the scope of the project:

It might make sense to start with a few select facilitators, officers, and citizens from a local community as a pilot project. The outcome of the project could then be analyzed for its difficulties and successes, and as a working basis for follow-up meetings. These meetings in turn could continue the process of refining and broadening the scope for the project, so that, potentially, sizeable regions of the country can find new ways to coexist, if not bond. (p. 53)

But what concerns me the most about Schneider's Experiential Democracy dialogue work is related to the intensive polarization that America is currently experiencing through (former) President Trump's effective, continuous – and enormous – utilization of the variables of social-media addiction and cult indoctrination that I remarked on above, and which I will describe more extensively below. For now, though, it is relevant to illustrate some of

Schneider's own caveats and limitations about using his approach:

Only try this dialogue with someone you think might want to hear your point of view.... [The Experiential Democracy dialogue] can be used by most anyone with a basic level of maturity and willingness to work through a cultural, political, or religious conflict with another person.... [T]his is a format for the ordinary (comparatively composed) person who struggles with social, cultural, and political conflicts every day and yet has few means to address or resolve them. This is also a dialogue for people who contend with such conflicts among families, neighbors, and fellow citizens and yet who are open to addressing them.... These are people who share a profound concern for the alarming rates of division and strife in our country and the world at large. (p. 21)

I will return to my concerns about the widespread potential effectiveness of Schneider's Experiential Democracy work in the last section of this review essay, but at this point let's take a look at the second book under review here – Christopher Shaefer's *Re-Imagining America*.

Shaefer's *Re-Imagining America*

In *Re-Imagining America*, Christopher Shaefer presents an extensive and cogent analysis of many disturbing aspects of America, making use of political, economic, cultural, psychological, and spiritual forces. Furthermore, Shaefer is very aware of the dangers of media manipulation, which I will discuss further in the context of social-media addiction and cult indoctrination stemming from former President Trump in the final section of this review essay:

Given the bewildering state of the world and the manipulative, aggressive and sometimes false nature of the media, we also need to

become conscious of what, when and with what frequency we attend to the news and to then monitor our reactions.... And so a populace which watches television an average of five hours a day, or 39 hours a week, and in addition spends many hours on the internet, elects a reality show TV star to become president, confirming that our national political reality reflects the dynamics and false images created by the media. (pp. 6, 83)

In regard to his concerns about America's unethical, egotistical, and selfish economic and business practices, Shaefer forcefully and impactfully conveys his perspective and analysis:

To restore American society to the promise of its founders and to renew the social contract between government and its citizens, it is essential to limit the power of financial and business interests.... The law [Rudolf Steiner's Fundamental Social Law] points to the growth of egotism in wage-based economies in which every individual is encouraged to look out for their own interests at the expense of others, thereby producing long-term negative consequences.... A competitive wage-based economy will enhance the egotism of the worker and that of society by creating the illusion that we essentially work for money rather than meaning or community well-being.... I was frankly shocked by the deep and profoundly negative human, psychological, economic, and social impacts of income inequalities in the United States.... The United States has the greatest wealth inequalities of any advanced Western society.... Why should we be surprised that when people struggle to survive, or to have safe housing and enough to eat, that they become psychologically and physically ill, especially when living in societies that shame them by constantly promoting the images and products of the rich. (pp. 51, 64, 65, 73–4)

Shaefer applies his above concerns, in regard to both media manipulation and unethical economic and business practices, to Donald Trump a few months after Trump became the president of the United States:

The Trump Presidency makes fully visible to all American citizens, and indeed to the world, the truth of the old adage that what is good for General Motors is good for America: it cements corporate influence and control over both American government and much of American culture.... His many threats and ongoing lies enhance the distraction, unease and fear living in my soul and that of many others. So we all need to learn to disinfect ourselves daily, to clean our souls of 'Trumpitis', by not rushing to the media to see the latest insult or outrage, and by learning to look with quietness and discernment at what is transpiring in Washington, D.C. and around the world. Otherwise, Trump blocks our creativity and insight, sows confusion in our soul, and lames our will for doing the good. (pp. 80–1)

Schaefer demonstrates an early awareness of the disastrous consequences that would take place from Trump's manipulation of the American public through his skillful use of social media in the context of Trump's 'alternative facts':

A second concern has to do with undermining the truth, through the outright lying and the creation of 'alternative facts' by Trump and the spokespeople of his administration. If he can persuade enough people that there are conservative facts and liberal facts, one no better than the other, then civilization is lost, because the possibility of dialogue, of distinction between facts and interpretations, is gone, and objective science and knowledge denied. (pp. 81–2)

Schaefer was also immediately concerned about newly elected President Trump's mental health⁵ and the consequential dangers to world peace:

Underlying these concerns is the worry about the stability, health, and maturity of Trump's personality.... In addition to the worry about the authoritarian tendencies of the administration, I fear the threat to world peace posed by our new chief executive. How easy it is to move from a war of words to acts of war when the White House is occupied by an insecure, psychologically challenged person, supported by advisors such as Stephen Bannon and Stephen Miller, acknowledged provocateurs, or 'bomb throwers', from the conspiracy-laden alt-right movement. (pp. 81–2)

Schaefer's concerns about the detrimental effects of Americans electing Donald Trump as their president became even more pronounced as Trump entered the second and third years of his presidency:

We have come home and occupied ourselves by electing a lying, narcissistic, ill-tempered, misogynistic, racist, uncultured but clever fool, thereby truly expressing aspects of what we have become.... If we add to this that our president dominates the global news cycle, attacks the free press and manufactures lies without end, then we have to accept that we live in dystopian times in which the very basis of democracy is undermined.... I believe we are again at such a point, in which the ideology of oppression and the forces of fear, hatred, egotism and division threaten to overwhelm us, and to neglect those founding principles and high ideals which marked the origin and development of this once-great nation. (pp. 108, 142, 162)

However, Schaefer complements his insightful awareness of all the above pitfalls in America, both historically and currently through the (now former) presidency of Donald Trump, with an optimistic portrayal of the potential for America to renew itself, both politically and spiritually. The following is a preliminary, extended

description of how Schaefer makes this transition in perspective in the book under review:

Throughout these essays I have argued that as American citizens we have allowed political, cultural, and economic elites to manipulate us in order to pursue their own wealth and visions of power at our expense, leading to the corruption and decline of a once-great nation.... The question we face, then, is whether we can accept that our history is one of both high aspirations and noble truths, and of crimes against both the human and natural world.... Many of the essays in this book point in the direction of viable alternatives: from a basic guaranteed income, the practice of direct democracy and co-operative economics, to seeing safety, health care, education, freedom of speech and association and work as human rights.... But these changes require that ever-greater numbers of people move from the pursuit of greed and egotism toward a culture of meeting compassion and of service as a worldview and a practice in life.... If the resistance to Donald Trump and everything he embodies recognizes that the problems we face are much deeper than the personality and policies of a president, that they represent a spiritual, social, political and economic malaise, calling for a re-imagining of America for our time, then there is hope for the future. (pp. 102–3, 116, 141)

Through a number of his essays in *Re-imagining America*, Schaefer has described the potential for Americans to engage in both political and spiritual sustenance and renewal, with a focus upon meditative quiet and solitude in conjunction with effective progressive social and caring political action, to transform the disturbing aspects of America into something good and beneficial:

Goodness, on the other hand, rests on a felt sense of connection to the world, to the natural, human and divine community of

which we are part. We have all experienced people, regardless of their station in life, who embrace life, diversity, human freedom and equality and seek ‘beloved community’ with others.... I do feel that all of us have an ability to take on significant issues of our society by locating the inner quality in those issues and finding those same situations in our personal life to transform.... It is only individuals, with the aid of others, that bring about change and progress in society. And out of our own experience we know that prayer, meditation and healing thoughts do have an effect on others and the world.... So what is it that we can do as concerned Americans and citizens of a world in crisis? Clearly, we can be politically and socially active in many domains, from protesting to political organizing to running for local office.... Can we... practice being active witnesses to that which lives in our soul and to that which lives in the world? To do so means creating moments of inner and outer quiet, taking time out from the busy stream of our lives to sit, to reflect, to engage in mindfulness activities, and to pray or meditate for guidance and insight in order to serve that which is good, that which is life enhancing in the world. (pp. 10, 17–18, 83–4)

Schaefer indeed has a deep spiritual belief in the power of listening to one’s inner voice for guidance with regard to engaging in caring progressive social and political action:

If we give an issue or a question time, it will reveal its truth to us because in the quiet of our soul, there is a sense for truth, for fairness, for community, and for life. We need to allow it to speak. If we cannot really trust government to speak the truth, and we know that many professions have been captured by corporate interests, and that the media is invariably biased in one direction or the other, we must learn to rely on our own, hopefully informed judgment, on our soul wisdom.... A sense for truth becomes the language of the soul only if we give it the time and attention to shape our thoughts, feelings and actions. And it will

speak in diverse ways, sometimes as a feeling or a thought, and sometimes from the outside through a song, an article or a chance comment from a stranger. We need to practice listening to it, and to give it our attention, for I believe it is our essential being that is then speaking in our soul, helping us to a deeper discernment. (p. 84)

Schaefer ties his spiritual beliefs related to progressive social and political action to the logotherapy practice and philosophy of psychiatrist and Nazi concentration-camp survivor Victor Frankl:

Frankl maintained that human beings are motivated by a ‘will to meaning’, and that life has meaning under all circumstances, even under great suffering.... Each human being is unique and has something singular to offer the world, a mission and purpose which gives meaning to their existence.... [O]ne should not search for an abstract meaning in life, but should respond concretely and specifically to those demands, requests and opportunities which life presents. (p. 91)

In addition, Schaefer gave us some pragmatic spiritual and political advice to work through the daunting issues we are faced with in these current precarious times:

We can carry this awareness of the basic goodness of people as a talisman against the cynicism of the media, and also against the acts of cruelty which people do still carry out against nature and each other.... We are called upon to bear witness to the times we live in, and also to lead our lives as if the society we long for is already present now. The more we practice this – the implementing and enacting of our values in life, and also acknowledging our failures to do so – the more I think hope is alive in our soul and in the world.... We need moments of quiet reflection, no I-phone or computer screen, in order to ponder our life and to learn to hear our inner voice.... By using

our power of attention in closely following what is occurring within us and around us, we can slow down our more automatic reactions of anger, projection, fear, violence and greed. (pp. 95, 97, 134, 137)

Finally, Schaefer has an idealistic hope and vision for the immediate future, which I believe is now actually in the realm of immediate possibility with the election of Joe Biden as the next president of the United States:

There is a range of issues requiring international co-operation and action. These include climate change, migration and refugees, regional economic development in the poorer regions of the earth, war, including nuclear weapons and regional conflicts, terrorism, and the intrusions of machines, robots and artificial intelligence (AI) and mass surveillance into our lives. In seeking to meet these international threats to human well-being, the United States faces the basic question of whether it will retreat into an ‘America first’, nationalist stance, or whether we will again become a world leader in supporting humanity’s collaborative effort to meet these mounting challenges.... It took leaders deeply committed to the founding ideals of freedom, democracy, equality and economic justice to galvanize the nation into positively responding to the outer and inner challenges of these turning points in our history. Can we again find leaders with the moral imagination, the conscience and the vision to guide the American public to a new and more noble chapter in its history? Can we overcome the pattern and ideology of oppression, of global domination and of economic exploitation which have characterized so much of our actions and policies in recent decades, and regain the respect of the global community, providing a beacon of hope for humanity? Can we again become ‘the fact, the symbol and the promise of a new beginning?’. (pp. 145, 167)

Depolarization, Cult Indoctrination, Social-Media Manipulation and Addiction, and Trump

Although in *The Depolarizing of America* Schneider did not make any direct mention of the widespread destructive political consequences stemming from US President Donald Trump that Schaefer extensively described in *The Re-imagining of America*, Schneider does convey a keen awareness of the dangers of 'Trumpism' in the second edition of his previous book, *The Spirituality of Awe*, which he described as follows from the website *Citizen Therapist*:⁶

Trumpism is an ideology, not an individual, and it may well endure and grow after the [next] Presidential election.... (Variants can be seen all over Europe.) Trumpism is a set of ideas about public life and a set of public practices characterized by: ...Scapegoating and banishing groups of people who are seen as threats, including immigrants and religious minorities... Degrading, ridiculing, and demeaning rivals and critics... Fostering a cult of the Strong Man who: ... Appeals to fear and anger... Promises to solve our problems if we just trust in him... Reinvents history and has little concern for truth... Never apologizes or admits mistakes of consequence... Sees no need for rational persuasion... Subordinates women while claiming to idealize them... Disdains public institutions like the courts when they are not subservient... Champions national power over international law and respect for other nations... Incites and excuses public violence by supporters. (pp. 107–8)

Schneider clearly stated his own concerns about the destructive aspects of Trumpism to US democracy:

At the political level, Trumpism is an emerging form of United States fascism.... It's clear that the United States republic faces a

clear and present danger when the candidate of a major political party embraces an anti-democratic ideology.... The 'Urban Dictionary' has defined Trumpism as 'the belief system that encourages pretentious, narcissistic behavior as a way to achieve money, fame, and power.' (p. 108)

And Schneider further emphasized the dangers of Trumpism as he conveyed its effects as follows, again borrowing from the *Citizen Therapist* website:⁷

1. Fear and alienation among scapegoated groups, beginning with Latino immigrants and Muslims, and then other groups who become identified as threats.
2. Exaggerated masculinity as a cultural ideal, with particular influence on young people and economically insecure men [primarily Caucasian].
3. Coarsening of public life by personal attacks on those who disagree.
4. Erosion of the United States democratic tradition which has emphasized the agency of 'we the people' instead of the Strong Man tradition of power. (p. 108)

Certainly, Schneider's concerns about Trumpism are well-founded, especially as the United States is currently, as I write, in the process of removing Trump from office with the election of Joe Biden; but apparently *Trumpism* (with or without Trump) is by no means defeated (Lee, 2020). However, Schneider did not apply his concerns about Trumpism when describing his Experiential Democracy depolarization dialogue in *The Depolarization of America*, and neither did Schaefer (2019) when describing part of his remedy for many of the pitfalls of America, that he has conveyed so impactfully, to include reconnection and relationships with others:

So we must do the great work of reconnection... in order to create the experiences for a more meaningful life and a healthier, ecological society.... We have lost a

true relationship to others, to the great gifts of conversation, friendship, family life, and the abiding value of partnership and marriage.... We can bring our attention to practicing genuine conversation and true human encounter.... Human meeting and conversation are truly the central, archetypal phenomena of all social life. By focusing our attention on our dialogue with others, on the practice of deep listening, we can find the keys to working on ourselves, to building relationships and to healing society. It is meaningful and open conversation which enlivens, builds empathy, bridges divides, strengthens community and makes social action possible. (pp. 116–17, 121)

Although Schaefer did not offer the kind of extensive concrete valuable techniques for dialogue communication to offset polarization that Schneider has given us, he has conveyed his realization that genuine dialogue has the potential to bridge conversations that are more ‘problematic’:

I also realize that with friends and in relationships of trust, I can frequently listen longer and with empathy and encouragement for the speaker. I then have both an open mind and an open heart, manifesting interest and empathy toward the other. These are important social forces which I am able to exercise in trusting and creative social circumstances. Having had that experience and the resulting feelings of joy and creativity, I can then practice extending them to conversations that are more problematic. This requires an effort to stop my reactive self, my defensive responses. Here, I am reminded of a dyad exercise to which a dear friend introduced me, and which I have sometimes used to create a mood of deep listening in groups that I have worked with because it suspends our more anti-social sides for a brief period of time. Two people sit across from each other and ask who are you, each sharing for five minutes without interruption, and then the speaker asks the listener the same question. Once you have

done this two or three times each, you realize what a relief to have such a space of listening and of interest, and also how much of yourself you have shared in such a short time.... Once we have this experience with the other, an important bond is formed, deeper friendship is possible, and a circle of trust is created. (p. 123)

Although both Schneider and Schaefer have demonstrated a keen awareness of the destructive consequences of Trump (in the case of Schaefer) or Trumpism (in the case of Schneider in his book *The Spirituality of Awe*), neither one of them has applied this awareness in any kind of concrete way to describe the significant challenges to receiving the benefits and value of dialogue, connection, and relationships with others. These destructive consequences are tremendously interwoven with the intensively violating and controlling aspects of cult indoctrination amplified by social-media manipulation and addiction (Benjamin, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Hassan, 2018, 2020; Lee, 2019, 2020; Singer, 2003). Bandy Lee (2020) in particular has conveyed a penetrating and extensive analysis of the extremely destructive consequences stemming from both Trump and Trumpism with regard to the possibilities of constructive communication between people. First off, Lee (2020) sized up what she perceives as the disturbingly unhealthy personality factors in many Trump supporters:

A demagogue... is able to stir those who have felt inept, inferior, and abjectly insignificant into reimagining themselves as a powerful, entitled people of destiny. Through the vilification of outgroups such as immigrants, Democrats, the so-called ‘elite’, and the media that was critical of Donald Trump, his supporters and attendees of his rallies can evacuate their feelings of self-loathing, weakness, and humiliation. In purging themselves of these feelings they transfer them onto others; by casting others as the epitome of

evil they are then able to refigure themselves as being superior and chosen. Accordingly, Donald Trump, the man who delivers them this intoxicant, is exalted for the brash social dominance he displays, the prejudices he affirms, and for protecting them from the world, which they experience as a very dangerous and threatening place....

That exaltation and sense of identification are behind the inseparable bond that leader and followers have come to share, like parent and child. Once the followers identify with their leader, any criticism of scandal concerning his fraudulence, his inanities, or his criminality is experienced as simultaneously posing an existential threat to themselves; their leader is not just protector but country, constitution, and government itself. Criticism therefore activates defensive denial, disavowal, and a willingness to fight to one's death to protect their 'protector'. As this is essentially an inviolable bond, if a situation were to arise wherein unfavorable facts, science, and incriminating evidence were to mount, the more they will rather unmoor themselves from reality. In doing so, they find and cling ever more closely to the few sources of information that will corroborate their beliefs and adopt unquestioningly their leader's fixed, false beliefs. Their ability to return successfully to previous levels of functioning depends on the swiftness of any intervention, the completeness of the separation from the leader and sources of propaganda, and the support they receive in the aftermath of the trauma. (p. 121)

Bandy Lee (2020) has some wise words for how to effectively deal with Trump's followers when he is no longer their leader:

I am often asked how to engage these [Trump's] followers, which is a chief question for many people. Mental health professionals are indeed frequently confronted with the question: 'How do we reason with a Trump supporter?' The quick answer to that query is 'You don't'. That Donald Trump's supporters must be convinced and won over, in order...

[for] him to be removed from power, is a common misconception that people have. The reality is that the opposite holds true: removing him from power will reduce the followership [*sic*]. In the meantime, people should follow certain general guidelines when engaging with Trump supporters. First, they should not be confronted with facts, for it will only rouse resistance (subconsciously, they already know what is true, which is why they project onto others their own characteristics very accurately; for example, their radically irrational support of the leader can be described as symptomatic of the 'Trump Derangement Syndrome' they often accuse of others, or call peaceful protesters the 'violent left', even when the FBI reports that the tiny percentage of violence that did occur is from the right-wing Boogaloo Boys). Second, persuasion would not be the goal, for that will only lead to exhaustion: the problem is in their granting an impaired individual power, not in their cognitive system or, most of the time, even their mental health. Third, people should continue to state facts, evidence, and science-based approaches elsewhere, repeatedly and without apology, intimidation, or shame, so that a delusional narrative does not 'bulldoze over' the truth through its sheer emotional force, upon which pathology depends. (pp. 142-3)

Lee (2020) then proceeds to empathically describe a number of therapeutic guidelines for dealing with the aftermath of Trump supporters who no longer have their esteemed leader to follow, and her advice is once again wise and timely. Her description is in alignment with numerous accounts that describe cult indoctrination, and in particular cult indoctrination from Trump and Trumpism (Benjamin, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Hassan, 2018, 2020; Lee, 2019; Singer, 2003). I believe that Lee's (2020) advice about this is extremely noble, and the best approach for trying to avoid the worst of the consequences to the United States stemming from the Trump presidency:

Rather than facts and arguments, other management principles should be followed with Trump supporters, as follows:
...Reduction of exposure to ‘the leader’....
Reduction of cultic programming.... Change of circumstances.... Emotional support. We begin with one of the key principles of our professional practice: in all matters of health, we triage before we treat, and the removal of the primary offending agent comes first: it is for this reason that our first principle focuses heavily on Donald Trump. His removal from office and the accompanying reduction of exposure that his supporters have to him will automatically release many from his influence. The reduction of exposure will diminish the natural induction of highly contagious symptoms among the population that comes with having a severely mentally impaired person in an influential position: violence, paranoia, fixed false beliefs, and loss of connection with reality. Following that first intervention, the next treatment principle should be employed in order to effect a reduction of cultic programming, programming which can by itself reform thoughts and inculcate fixed false beliefs. Fox News, One America News Network, and other sites that promote right-wing conspiracy theories, as well as social media that filter information to create functional ‘bubbles’, are all forms of programming that work to serve that function.... By removing people from the circumstances that rendered them vulnerable to predators in the first place, they can be protected from being exploited again. Steps for bringing about such a change might include: reducing relative poverty and enhancing access to education, health care, and social mobility.

Finally, for future healing, especially of the trauma that will inevitably come with the realization that the person they believed to be their ‘savior’ was actually their mental and material abuser, Trump followers will need emotional support from friends, family, and others. Genuine human connection and acceptance will provide them with the strength

to abandon cherished beliefs and to help hasten their recovery. One must also be prepared for the instance where some or many cases may take a lifetime to recuperate, or do not recover at all. The difficulty depends on emotional investment, length of time of attachment, and degree of trauma one is likely to experience. (pp. 142–3)

I don’t think that any of Bandy Lee’s wise and timely analysis and advice here contradicts what Schneider and Schaefer have advocated for in their respective books that I have reviewed here. As described earlier, Schneider clearly stated that people need to have a readiness to engage in the kind of constructive depolarization dialogue that he espouses; and Schaefer forcefully and extensively described various social, political, economic, and psychological destructive forces that are certainly consistent with the dangers of cult indoctrination and social-media manipulation and addiction as a consequence of Trump and Trumpism.

Furthermore, with the election of Joe Biden to replace Donald Trump as President of the USA, perhaps Schneider’s Experiential Democracy depolarization dialogue work, as well as Schaefer’s idealistic essays about political involvement, self-renewal, and reconnection and relationships with others, may now have more of a possibility to ease the rampant polarization afflicting America. But at the same time, I believe there is a crucial missing piece in both Schneider and Schaefer’s books that I have reviewed, and this missing piece, as portrayed by Lee as the cult indoctrination of Trump followers, may very well be the essential ingredient that needs to be acknowledged, understood, and effectively dealt with in order to successfully undertake the kind of urgent constructive actions for which both Schneider and Schaefer have advocated.

Notes

- 1 See Schneider (2020) for all references to Kirk Schneider's Experiential Democracy work in the first two sections of this review essay.
- 2 See Schaefer (2019) for all references to Christopher Schaefer's essays in this review essay.
- 3 See Benjamin, 2018, 2020a; Hassan, 2019; Lee, 2020.
- 4 See Schneider (2019) for his most recent book on awe.
- 5 See Lee (2019) for a number of informed and impactful essays by various psychiatrists and mental-health experts regarding President Trump's mental health.
- 6 The *Citizen Therapist* website is no longer in operation.
- 7 See note 6.

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About the contributor



Elliot Benjamin has a Ph.D. in mathematics, a Ph.D. in psychology with a concentration in Consciousness and Spirituality, is currently a psychology mentor/Ph.D. committee chair at Capella University (www.capella.edu), and was previously a mathematics professor for 21 years. He has published four books and approaching 200 articles in the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, philosophy/spirituality and awareness of cult dangers, parapsychology, the creative artist and mental disturbance, progressive politics, pure mathematics, and mathematics enrichment. Elliot lives in Maine, is married, enjoys playing the piano, tennis, and ballroom dancing, and has an author's website that can be viewed at www.benjamin-philosopher.com.