

# A Journal of the Plague

## Year, Day 193

*by David Ackley*

Coronavirus in America: Epidemic and the Ideology of Denial, Part 2

We look to different sources for the truth of the moment when Trump lies coughing at Walter Reed—where my father, Staff Sergeant Harry Ackley, gasped his last, in 1949. Early in the pandemic I wrote about denial and its potential dangers. Now I would re-read my own tea leaves, but for the feeling that I was merely completing a palimpsest of an old story, the one of myth and tragedy which speaks of hubris, and nemesis, and the way what we deny catches up with us.

It might be noted that denial is not the same as skepticism or doubt. I reject the usual terminology of "in denial." Denial, as used by its adherents is not a condition or a state of mind: it is a blunt instrument to bludgeon the other into submission, or extinction. Denial is absolutist, certain, complete in its refusal to see, acknowledge or accept even the indubitably real. It makes a claim on the fiction of immortality and is the counterpart of absolute belief, which is the claim of complete knowledge and the power of prediction.

Tragedy not only says that such claimants are tripped up by nemesis, the tribute the fates require of those who claim more power than is theirs, but that the price is exacted in the coin of the particulars. Oedipus claims absolute knowledge of past, present and future, his superior sight as the physical aspect of this knowledge—his "far-seeing-ness"—and in the unveiling of Sophocles' drama, is progressively shown what he has blinded himself to, that his certainty should have been checked with doubt,

his impetuosity stayed from murder ( of his own father), his pride tempered with the humility that would allow him to heed warnings of danger, foresee the risks of going too far.

His drive to complete knowledge is itself blinding, in that omniscience is not within the power of humans. Partial perception and therefore partial comprehension is our lot; sight is limited by distance, the placement of our eyes in our skull, the available light. Knowledge is never perfectible. Oedipus's self-blinding at the tragedy's end is only the humbling admission of how blind he has been all along by denying this truth of existence: that no one, ever, can claim to see everything.

Trump's mentor was Roy Cohn, the viciously predatory power-seeker who taught Trump early on the advantages to be gained by denying any reality other than the one he aspired to. What Cohn failed to teach, and Trump has clearly failed to learn, is to separate performance and belief. But then, at least according to Tony Kushner's great play of, among other things, the dire consequences of denial , *Angels in America*, whose evil protagonist is none other than Cohn, even to his agonized end Cohn was blinded by his own bullshit. In denying Cohn, Trump missed the denouement in the final act, when Cohn was felled by what he most vigorously denied: his own vulnerability to AIDS, which had laid him open to the risk.

At this moment in history, with Trump under the ministrations of dozens of doctors, it is impossible to deny the echoes with the fate of the world-class denier, Cohn, in Tony Kushner's version, groaning in his wet sheets, begging for relief, as his own particular nemesis, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg—whom he gloated that he had knowingly lied about to prompt her death sentence--hovers over him. If you wanted surrogates for Ethel Rosenberg, in Trump's case you could substitute all those who have been lured into the danger of infection, illness and death by his siren songs of miracles, quack cures, and dismissals of precautions like mask-wearing. Not to speak of those

whom he may have directly infected after he tested positive himself. One could see a proper place for them around his present bedside.

Denying for himself and his followers the risks of Covid contagion, and reinforcing it with his insouciant actions, Trump has met his particular nemesis in the virus.

In his blindness, Oedipus at least acknowledged his failure to see. Whether Trump gains that self-knowledge remains open to doubt. Whether he does or doesn't may be only a personal matter for him. For the rest of us the tragedy rolls on toward some unforeseeable end.



### **Coronavirus in America: Epidemic and the Ideology of Denial : Part 1.**

*Denial is never good.*

Our wise friend, Irene Robinson.

I've heard a number of recommendations for relevant reading during this epochal plague. Truest to the moment is Tony Kushner's, great, but still under-rated political play, " Angels in America," *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. It has been under-rated exactly because it is political, and the idea of politics in art upsets artists and critics, never mind the audience and the general public.

*A-a-acentuate the Positive,*

*Elimimin—a-ate the negative...*

Silly song lyric from the 1940's. Also, official theme of the Ideology of Denial, hereafter *Denialism*. Note the false dichotomy: Buff up *The Positive*. But Eliminate *The Negative*. Deep six it. Hide it in the closet. Drive a stake through its heart.

Denial—to “eliminate the negative,”—is justified, from the subject-position of “the good,” the positive, hope, the fantastically perfect future, when the denier is himself good: Denial is his virtuous weapon, his sword against the negative, the downer, the tragic, the petty realities of disease, disaster, and death.

(Positivism as ideology and modus operandi is the characteristic stance of American history, writ large by Pop philosophers (e.g. *The Power of Positive Thinking*); Preachers like Billy Graham; Politicians: You Name it; Historians and textbook writers of “American History.”))

Here's a prediction: Along with “The Wire,” “Angels in America,” will eventually be rehabilitated as one of the great works of dramatic literature, or maybe just literature, tout court, of the first half of the Twenty First century. Both involve, as it happens, bringing to light slow-burning crises in society that suddenly ignite.

Naturally enough, “Angels...” has been set aside, its political content, and profound warning having been ignored, exactly by the ideological process it warned against, *Denialism*.

A couple things emerge from thinking about Kushner's play:

--That we are in the process of not one, but three viral pandemics; the flu, and AIDs, while checked, are still killing hundreds of thousands every year. The coronavirus which they predicted will doubtless outpace both.

--Ronald Reagan, modelling denial at the highest level, despite more and more desperate outcries from the gay and lesbian communities and their allies, turned a bland, blind eye to the killing AIDS virus, until it became a pandemic, with ninety thousand cases reported, almost all of them subsequently fatal.

A kind mentor, he provided the plague playbook for Trump. Ignore, deny, grudgingly partially admit, but keep denying too. Your followers hang on your every word...Hang.

Another mentor of course, was Trump's amigo, the virulent Roy Cohn, whose version of the ideology, Tony Kushner presents in the following passage, from "Angels in America, Part One, Millenium Approaches" :

Henry: (Roy Cohn's longtime doctor) ....You have AIDS.

Roy: AIDS.

Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe that they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that.  
Henry: No?

Roy: No, Like all labels, they tell you one thing and one thing only, where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call...Homosexuals are men who know nobody and nobody knows, Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry,

Henry: No.

Roy: No. I have clout. A lot. I can pick up this phone punch fifteen numbers, and you know who will be on the other end in under five minutes, Henry?

Henry: The president?

Roy: Even better, Henry. His wife.

Henry: I'm impressed.

Roy: I don't want you to be impressed. I want you to understand.....I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Regan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because *what* I am is is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry , who fucks around with guys.

Henry: OK, Roy.

Roy: And what is my diagnosis, Henry?

Henry: You have AIDS, Roy.

Roy: No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer.

(Pause)

Henry: Well, whatever the fuck you have, Roy, it's very serious...So get on the phone, Roy, and dial the fifteen numbers, and tell the First Lady you need an experimental treatment (AZT) for "liver cancer" , because you can call it any damn thing you want , Roy, but what it boils down to is very bad news.

Is *Denialism* the ideology or its method ? It's not clear, but the most pernicious of its messengers is its chief ideologist, Roy Cohn, and we can see him displaying it in the complex passage above, where the fact of the ideology, in disease terms its etiology if you prefer that take, is on display.

The lawyer practising his argument, his summation to the jury, but also the ideologist's need to first convince himself that for him, denial is the way to go. This means necessarily denying the existence and presence in his body of a possibly communicable disease which might just have something to do with his having sex with other men( So he does not have that disease, thus the choice, weird as it seems of the equally fatal liver cancer.) He is not gay (and never has been) because gay men have no "clout," that is, power.

He is right, because whatever you do in your own interest is by definition right, and if that requires denial, which requires, always, lying, so be it. And so on.

Here I have to cut a bit to the chase. Why? Because, people presently are denying denialism, and someone close to me came within a hair of infection by the virus, whether he admits it or not( he hasn't yet) partly through his passive acceptance of the pervasive

denialism of his community and Texas in general, or the “solid south,” even more inclusively.

I mention among the many followers of the denialist ideology in the news recently:

--Rush Limbaugh, who early on decried the contagion as a “hoax.” Along with anyone who tweeted or retreated his message. A case could be made for criminal penalties for such messaging.

--The partygoer on a crowded beach in Florida—where both cases and deaths are rapidly increasing—who defended his right to party because he was young, which would protect him anyway from the worst effects of the disease. Fuck you, grandma, in other words.

--The Texas Lieutenant governor who went on television to pronounce himself willing to come out of isolation, even though he's over 70, ready to give his life for his country. Volunteering for heroism, as it were. This of course denied the right of refusal to others he might blindly infect, including his nearest and dearest. That Denialism is narcissistically inflected (or infected) seems undeniable.

Of our Denier-in-Chief, who megaphones denial every time he opens his mouth with his preferences for the pink-fantastic future over the inconveniently grim and very real present, we should leave the testimony to his one-time teacher, and putative friend, Roy Cohn.

Cohn was denied as all Trump's friends and associates eventually are (Judas got nothin' on him!) and dying in agony, poverty and solitude, retained sufficient clarity, near the end, to speak with the rueful recognition of the teacher surpassed—and abandoned—by his former student. In real life, Cohn was quoted in Marie Brenner's , 2017, Vanity Fair article:

*... the dying Cohn, in those waning days, would say, “Donald pisses ice water.”*

Ask the man who knows.

Although I'm going to continue this discussion beyond today because of my interest in Kushner's pioneering play, I must needs here cut to the chase, that is to a conclusion, which begs to be prepared more carefully. But here it is anyway:

Call it a warning, as Tony tried to do more gracefully, carefully, and with great passion. Urgency sometimes risks incoherence:

Near the end of the trashy but entertaining movie, "Under Siege," (hmmm.) Gary Busey is escaping from the Battleship Missouri in a submarine with the stolen missile, still denying his own mortality, and believing wholly in his impending escape. The submarine captain, looking through the periscope sees that a round from the Missouri's sixteen inch gun is about to write their ending. In the last second before it blows them all to hell, he turns to Busey:

" You fool. You've killed us all."

Which could also be history's verdict on the Trump presidency and his full-throated commitment to denial.

