What follows is sample #1 from a five-part series of opening sections of *Turkeyfoot*; for more information, contact: 

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Happy Reading!
“What is the use of a house if you haven’t got a tolerable planet to put it on?”

— the New England Transcendentalist
Henry David Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*

**Introducing the Thesis**

Today, my torn family is at war with itself. At the same time, our divided country is, too. Inadvertently, I ignited the spark that unleashed our family’s current ugly, tragic warfare. Unpredictably, the flaying of our own flesh has given me insight into America’s social stalemate:

Deadlock occurs when movement becomes blocked because one person (or a group of people) is holding an expectation of another—of one’s “opposite,” a.k.a. “The Other”—and is awaiting a “concession” to be granted by his or her opposite, who expects a concession from their Other. With neither party willing to extend or expand its Self on behalf of The Other, movement is not possible. An anticipated concession might involve a belief, a behavior, a pledge of loyalty, a job, money or other tangible resources, a favor or a vote, forgiveness, praise, sex, etc., *ad infinitum.*
An example: Two trains are coming toward each other on the same track; as there is only one track, neither of the trains can advance once they are in front of each other. Thus: 1) the moving trains ram into each other; 2) each train stops, then stays in place, in an unyielding standoff—not unlike when family members or neighbors break all contact with each other; or 3) one of the trains brakes, then backs up to allow The Other passage, at which point, having conceded, the train that first breaks stalemate could then, in theory, proceed—IF the train granted passage a) leaves the track passable and b) does not block or otherwise hinder the initially-yielding train’s ensuing passage.

The endless war I’ve been fighting with most of my family for four decades has been over beliefs (they’d likely say “non-belief”)—not only religious but also social and political beliefs. Because
such beliefs represent core parts of each one’s Self identity, we are loathe to concede that The Other’s beliefs, behaviors, work, expressions of love, etc. might be as (or worse, more) valid or honorable as our own. Note: Each of these elements of identity is an ideal, not physically real.

Similarly, our nation—indeed, much of our interconnected world—is now split along ideological fronts. In the United States, those who adore Donald Trump and those who abhor him embody opposing sides of a deep rift that presently cuts through the heart of American society. [As I write this, similar dynamics tear away at Great Britain (vis-à-vis “Brexit”), Germany (AfD Partei), France (“Yellow Vests”), Italy (the “Five Star” movement), Poland (PiS), Russia (Putin), Turkey (Erdoğan).] Folks on polarized, diametrically-opposing fronts struggle to understand those on the other. It seems we have lost each other. In effect, too many of us say, too often and reflexively, “I don’t agree with what you say—and, by the way, everything else you do is wrong, bad and idiotic.”

By the sheer randomness of genetic lottery, my relatives’ beliefs and behaviors represent for me the norm in a camp I find foreign and distasteful. I encountered their socio-political co-travelers in most of the electorate I tried to reach in my 2016 US-Senate campaign. To understand that mainstream, I had to attempt to understand them better—which I have done, in small ways.

How can we ever bridge the gaps that have formed between us if we cannot feel compassion for one another? After all, the passions fueling our estrangement involve basic pillars of life: Our divisions include differing ideals about systems that dictate how humans “should” live and work, love and play, make art, worship—or not—and govern or be governed. In each case, our beliefs give rise to a system or set of systems that have the potential to liberate or to enslave all of us.

Currently, most Americans—regardless of political stripes—complain “The system is broken” but then shrug and go about our daily routines. Therefore, we seem unable—or outright refuse—to see something fundamental:

- We remain trapped in a system that does not serve the majority of our people optimally.
- For our willful blindness, we fail to demand systemic change, which is possible and long overdue.
- Our nation’s psychological makeup fuels our shared strengths even as it casts ideological straightjackets that keep us from re-evaluating our values and updating our beliefs.
- Out of mental laziness, we habitually reduce those who don’t share our beliefs as stupid or “evil.”
- Fearing change, we refrain from making better lives than the ones we have now, for ourselves and those who will follow.

We must cease our self-imprisonment if we’re to restore a world reeling from our abusing it, let alone save ourselves. To do that, we must renew our minds and stop conforming to sick systems.

Human beings create systems. Like us, systems vary in degrees of being healthy or ill, clever or unwise, efficient or inept. Humans (like families, communities, nations) evolve—or devolve—
over time: Our fortunes and abilities wax, just as they also wane. So do systems: Even once-healthy, robust systems become sick and unfit. As with a person with cancer, much of a given system’s decline takes place internally, invisibly, latently: Often, decay is visible only when the chance for remedy, for a return to vitality, has passed. As with cancer, systemic rot spreads first from within, in the most essential, minute parts of an organism. All might appear “all right” on the outside, but on the inside atrophy has become the norm—and final fate. As with terminally ill human beings, end-stage systems no longer can attain equilibrium: Renewal or replacement must occur if Life at all is to continue. Is it not this place, then, where we presently find ourselves?

What follows is a record of journeys that brought us to this unworthy, fractured present. While it often isn’t a pretty process, we must wade through an at-times uncomfortable, unflattering review of our shared as well as individual paths if we’re to reach a worthwhile, united future. Such cautionary tales are invitations to search for deeper understanding, to find new strategies. Without reflection, we stay stuck; with it, we might find a way forward at this eleventh hour.

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Turkeyfoot

about this book:
An eccentric gay-Quaker historian living in Germany decides on a quixotic whim— for deeply idealistic and quasi-spiritual reasons—to run for the US Senate in his native Iowa. To his consternation, he soon finds himself hip-deep in the moral quicksand of Midwestern Trumpism. Unexpectedly, he discovers that his Trump-drunk relatives embody the very electorate he has to woo. This story tells how this onetime farmboy got into this swamp, how he escaped, and how other residents of Trump Nation—if they truly care about our country and the larger world—might punch their way out of political paper bags as well. This book—two tomes woven into one, each uniquely pertinent to this historical moment—provides all Americans (as well as other mortals beyond our shores) a way out. Book One explores the cynical, two-party electoral system that both feeds and embodies the social-political deadlock our country faces; Book Two concludes with fifteen strategies for how to bridge the chasms that currently divide us: Combined, they outline how to rediscover compassion for each other at a juncture in our national and global history when either we find each other again or we all will be lost, together, forever.

about its author:
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