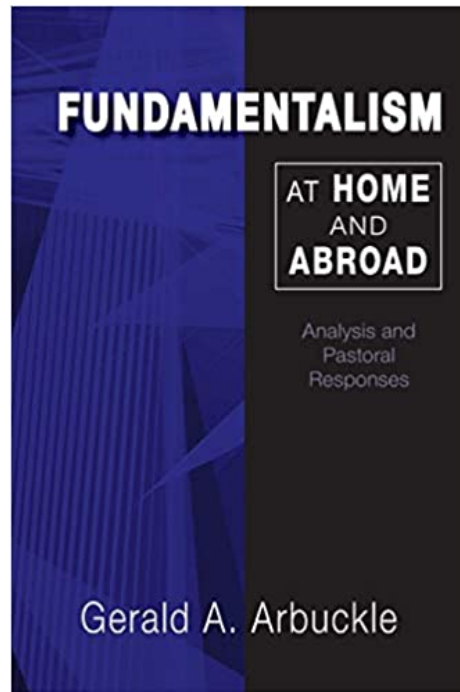


Interview with Gerald Arbuckle, S.M., Ph.D. (Sept 13, 2017)

By David R. Kopacz, MD



David: Since writing *Fundamentalism at Home and Abroad: Analysis and Pastoral Responses* (2017), what are your views of Trump's presidency?

Gerry: My views are pretty negative, to say the least. I have a book coming out which I just finished yesterday, *Loneliness: Insights for Healing in a Fragmented World*, and one point of the book is that the **mythology, the American dream, comes through as a very positive dream, but the danger is that in mythology, amnesia takes place. Mythologies can hide history. What it has hidden is the racist elements in the founding story of the United States,** including Jefferson. Now what Trump has done, in actual fact, is to lock into that hidden racial past of mythology. He is locked into that residual mythology, which is racist, and for him, Obama was the epitome of everything that shouldn't have happened. What I am finding (and I develop this in the *Loneliness* book) is that cargo-cult movements develop. One key element integral to the cargo-cults of Melanesia was a millennial movement to

destroy the past as a symptom of your loyalty to the leader.¹ Trump is developing his presidency based on, defined by, the destruction of the legacy of Obama. Anthropologically, it makes sense, and of course, he is locking into white rage very, very effectively so that people who support him are blinded to the evils that he is perpetuating in order to satisfy the desire to return to the negative elements of the founding story.

D: He is undoing many things even beyond Obama's presidency, tapping into the Tea Party movement, who view government as solely negative. So, the more they can destroy the government, even when *they are* the government, they think it is a good thing.

G: I presume that these Confederate statues, for example, were built not necessarily to perpetuate the Civil War, but to perpetuate the power of the States against the central government, pitting the South against the central government. It is extremely frightening. I pick it up in e-mails to me from around the United States of how people feel – well, you are right in the midst of it – and what it has done is to create enormous loneliness. Fear of the unknown is creating loneliness among minority groups and the people who are on the margin. With these 800,000 people...

D: DACA²

G: Yes, it is horrendous. You may know, Pricewaterhouse Coopers Australia, a big company, when he was elected, they were offering their personnel counseling because of what they feared Trump would lead to. Amazing. It is an example of how the fear moves. It is a global issue.

D: His approval rating is 35% – quite low for a president, but I find it even shockingly high. Most of the people I am talking with are asking, “How is this even happening? How is no one standing up? How are all the Republicans going along with this, even when he belittles them and then berates them?” Maybe people think they can get something out of him even though he is destructive. At first he was a buffoon, and then he is destructive, and now he is morally irreprehensible, but people are saying “Ok, but maybe we can get some of our views across, some of our policies through” – kind of following the wake, even though it is a wake of destruction. How can people go along with him?

G: Yes, it is frightening. **Which comes back to the point, which you would appreciate this very much, *reason* is not the issue. *Feeling* is the issue. *Culture* is the issue.**

D: The rage.

¹ “The ‘cargo’ message of leaders is: Repudiate the past by dramatically destroying crops and other goods as the pre-condition for the coming of the ‘new heaven’ of prosperity.” Arbuckle, *Loneliness: Insights for Healing in a Fragmented World*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017, p. 78.

² DACA – Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program in the USA allowing children born of illegal immigrants to remain in the US providing they follow proper procedures and registration

<https://www.uscis.gov/archive/consideration-of-deferred-action-for-childhood-arrivals-daca>.

G: The rage, the rage, you cannot reason with rage.

D: Do you know what is fascinating, when Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton were in the run-offs of the election, I realized that I could say, “He seems like the single biggest threat to democracy that our nation has seen in a very long time,” and yet many people on the right would say, “Hillary Clinton is the single biggest threat to democracy that our country has faced in a very long time.” We were both saying exactly the same thing and both of us think, “I understand we are saying the same thing, but I’m right and you’re wrong.” And at some point I realized, I don’t how to get past this because it is not something you can reason with or provide facts. Now there are all these *alternative facts*, *fake facts* and *fake news*, and both sides are calling each other *fake news*. It is a completely different political ecosystem that exists independent of reality. How can that be happening here in the United States?

G: Are you aware of that book, *It Can’t Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis. It was a popular book when I was in Oxford this year. It was written in 1934. It was on the most popular reading list of Blackwell’s and Oxford. It is a story of a president who is elected who has the all the qualities of a populist authoritarian leader mimicking Hitler and it was written in 1934. So, here it is describing a situation – manipulation of the media, the silencing of dissent (which is happening subtly, not so subtly in the United States), the attempt to control, the use of fake news to undermine honest media, for example – this is all part of a populist dangerous leader. It is amazing how it is sort of prophetic. Ok, it runs to an extreme, but nonetheless, it illustrates how democracy is in danger of being eaten away through populist support and the manipulation of media.

D: Technology has advanced in a way that has caught everyone off-guard where you can live in a media bubble. There is so much media out there that people can select what they want to hear, and it comes across as “here’s the latest news.”

G: And you notice how he is scapegoating the GOP at the same time? **He is preparing himself for a situation where in the election time, he will not be re-elected. He will blame the GOP and the Democrats – “they are at fault, not I.” So, you have narcissism taken to the extreme.**

D: Yes, because the Republican party has fragmented and the Democratic party, too, has splintered in half. I wondered if Bernie Sanders had capitulated a little bit more, and gotten behind Hillary Clinton, and not played into that division, if she might have been able to hold out over Donald Trump. I think that is one of the ways that Hitler came into power, which was by splitting the left.

G: How do you see this yourself? How is this going to continue to develop? Is it going to continue to develop along these lines where it gets worse?

D: After Charlottesville,³ I kept thinking about worst-case scenarios, and I have had to keep revising my worst-case scenario, unfortunately. Because, in the beginning, it was somebody running a reality show and this is destructive but it is not that serious. I think people did not take him seriously in the beginning among all the Republican candidates, but now he is systematically trying to destroy the foundation of American government and American democracy and replace it with an oligarchy and with his will. After Charlottesville, I actually wondered, could there be some type of coup in the United States because he is pulling so much of the military in and he's pushing out the democratically elected leaders, could he really, overtly and formally, overthrow the democracy. The United States has so many guns and now add the flare of white rage. There is this 35% of the population that has thrown themselves behind somebody who promises to put things back *the way they should be, the way they were*. I never thought that in the United States, that the democracy could be fragile in that sense. Where does this lead?

G: I noticed this morning they were saying that his popularity has slightly risen. My hunch is a possible scenario that he would not necessarily cause, but would use. It could be the North Korea situation where he becomes the "savior of the people," so he becomes "untouchable." He will then manipulate it further. That is what I feel is quite likely to happen.

D: Iran or ...

G: Yes, yes...

D: And the pact again with Russia – it is like a World War II scenario with the German/Russian alliance starting off with both of them allowing each other to promote their fascist agendas until the world gets too small for both of them to be gobbling up...

G: And to send his son-in-law as an emissary into the Middle East, unbelievable, this man has totally no experience and that is only one of his jobs.

D: That is the same with everyone he has brought into government. The U.N. Ambassador, Nikki Haley, well, you would think the definition of ambassador is that you are supposed to be diplomatic. But she is saying to North Korea that they are "begging for war." From the very beginning she was saying, it disturbed me so much, I think I put it in a blog, she said we are going to be "taking names." Right from the beginning she took a hostile and belligerent tone. I do not understand the right wing's abhorrence of the United Nations. It is almost as if the right-wing media has brainwashed people. They hear the word "UN," and they fly into a fit of rage. And it seems like the right wing feels it is their right and duty to disrespect and

³ Dara Linddara. "Unite the Right, the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, explained: The alt-right rally was a coming-out party for resurgent white nationalism in America." @vox.com. Updated Aug 14, 2017, 12:06pm EDT.

mock those they disagree with. I think that the president is encouraging and emboldening people to project their biases and prejudices onto others in an aggressive way.

G: Well as you know from your expertise, if the bully is at the top, he legitimizes bullying right through the system. I see it in the hospital system structure. If the CEO is a bully, you can bet your bottom dollar that it is right down through the system. They legitimize bullying actions through the system. **The US president is a fragmenter and a polarizer. He aims to fragment by his behavior, alliances, at all levels, international and national. Then that leads to the second stage, polarizer, where not only are they fragmented, but they are polarized. So, this is the tragedy, it is going to be extremely difficult therefore to get a rational debate in that kind of atmosphere.** And he is feeding it all the time.

D: I think a lot of people have gotten caught up in the question, “Does he know what he’s doing?” Or does he not know what he is doing? He seems so ignorant that it is hard to imagine he knows what he is doing except he has been very effective in what he has been doing. Whether he knows what he is doing or he doesn’t know what he’s doing – he’s very good at what he does. And he is continuing to do it. Do you think he knows what he is doing?

G: I have the same sort of reactions. **I am leaning more toward the feeling that he knows what he is doing because he is quite consistent about what he is doing. And it is all moving toward a much more authoritarian position of presidency.** He has surrounded himself with generals, which we hope will put some order into the chaos, but they happen to be generals, they happen to be people who are prone to authoritarianism. Hence I have grave doubts about. Sessions, if he would have been a normal person he would have resigned. They all become toadies to what this person is dreaming about. I have a terrible fear that he knows what he is doing.

D: There are people who are saying he is psychiatrically unstable, unfit, and a danger to society.⁴ My greatest hope is that the rule of law will be re-established with Mueller and the investigations that are going on that something will turn up that he has done something that is impeachable.

G: That is our hope, isn’t it? Millenarian movements are integral to the United States’ story. America cultivates them as a way of life and it is integral — going out West, for instance. So, when you get a Joseph McCarthy, he was locking into a millenarian movement and it took a long time for the Senate to get their act together against this man. You could not contradict him, otherwise you would be covered by the FBI. And that went on for how long – five years? And then you see, that permeated key areas of possible dissent. It permeated the media, it permeated Hollywood.

⁴ Bandy Lee (ed). *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 37 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess the President*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017, second edition 2019.

D: There was fear and this negated the ability to dissent.

G: Yes, fear, fear.

D: Because if you dissented, if you are dissenting, then you are un-American. How can you oppose the committee investigating Un-American activities?

G: So, this man is creating fear and suggesting a response to that fear by saying, “You follow me.”

D: The other thing that is so strange is the nationalist movements, this epidemic of nationalist movements, it is not just happening in the United States – Brexit, the Philippines, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Turkey – it is almost like an epidemic of nationalism. How do you understand the entire world being on the brink of tearing apart all these structures that have been built for tolerance, peace, collaboration, and connection?

G: Well, anthropologically, it all makes sense. **Once you disturb a culture, even a threat to disturb a culture, and even if intellectually you accept that the culture has to be disturbed, inevitably it leads to chaos levels of intensity. And chaos can only be appeased by returning to, what I feel gives me order. Nationalism is a way of giving me a sense of order because it has pre-existed, it is a residual mythology, so the residual mythology comes alive.** It never dies, it comes alive so that the United States, with the white rage against African Americans, that is a residual mythology that comes alive, it never died. It just happens to be quietly put aside for the time being, but is there to be used again because it gives me the comfort and sense of security and permanence. And globalization and technology are moving at such speed that our affectivities are not able to catch up with it.

D: Our emotions are not evolving at the same rate as our communication.

G: That is right. It is like we feel that change can take place effectively with great speed but it does not happen like that. Technology is moving so fast that there are ripple effects in a lot of areas. It can be so traumatic that there is this rush to splinter off and fragment, which is tragically normal, but what I find – and the fear to me is that in the past it could be contained to a degree. You could have Nazism within Germany relatively contained in a certain sense. That is no longer the case. What happens here happens everywhere.

D: Before World War II, there was Italian fascism and there were the Soviets and you know, Nazism and Japan – I try to go back in history and think “Is this a normal correcting balance, a kind of dialectic that is happening?”

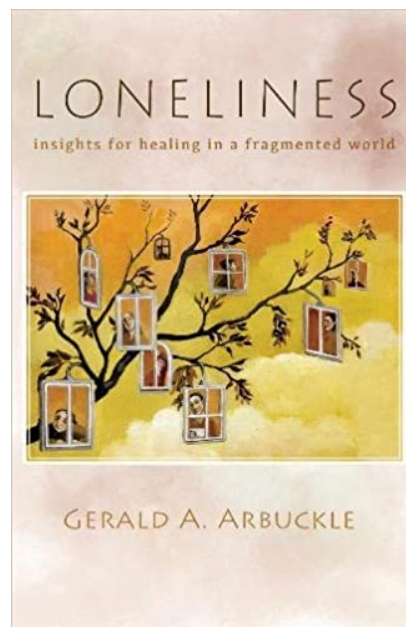
G: I think you have got a point there. Without going into Marxism, I think there is a dialectic here but we haven’t the time now, things are so dangerous in regard to the planet, that the corrective is – we haven’t possibly got that option anymore.

D: Our economies are so interconnected that, even without war, it seems that something dramatic could happen economically. Our technology is a double-edged sword. Technology

is becoming a weapon. We've made this tremendously interesting thing, the internet, that connects people instantaneously and yet there are these – it almost feels like these dark forces using connectivity against us.

G: That is fascinating. Yes, that makes sense. And the interconnectivity that the internet gives us, we assume that it solves the problem of loneliness. I do not believe it does, because it is a superficial interconnection. How many “friends” do we have on social media – to even use the word *friend* is a misnomer. It is a very shallow direction.

There is a real information overload. Put that on to a global scene and the pressure of technology and everything that goes with it increasingly intensifies the chaos, it intensifies the loneliness and the need for a sense of belonging which opens up the opportunity for nationalism, it just makes sense with the intensity that we have probably never experienced before internationally, globally.



D: Has anyone talked about neural fundamentalism?

G: No!?

D: What I'm thinking is that the nervous system is designed to simplify reality because even just in this room, the birds and the trees, periodically I notice a book title behind you as we're talking – there is all this stimuli coming in and the nervous system's job is to filter information for what is important and what is unimportant information. Our experience of consciousness is a kind of creation and simplification of the external reality.

G: It makes sense. It links to up with something that I decided to do. When we established the Refounding and Pastoral Development Unit we deliberately kept it small. **I found at university that you are so involved in meetings and administration, that it becomes impossible to think.** If you are at Oxford or Cambridge you can do that, but at a normal university, you cannot do that. So, we decided that we would not bring people *in* to this building, we would go *out* to people. We would have people come in like, visitors like yourself, and so on, we would have small little groups and seminars, but we would tend to go *out* in order to allow space to be protected, to allow us to keep thinking. We will go out, but we will protect ourselves, the space here, because otherwise our contributions would fail, we would not keep going and that has worked out perfectly well. **But when I listen to university people here, they are working so hard and are so overworked that the possibility of *thinking in-depth* becomes impossible. They become technicians for government. The nervous system becomes drowned with noise.**

D: Technicians have an uncritical attitude toward being efficient people who can produce more of the same. They only see what is in the box. How can we think when we are constantly measured, monitored, and bombarded by texts, emails, and meetings?

G: It seems to me, this is what I came to in this book on loneliness, that **loneliness has no positive value if we are not able to move into solitude.** To process what is happening in loneliness, I will give an example and begin with Wordsworth's, *I wandered lonely as a cloud*. He was lonely as a cloud. What changed was that he was suddenly confronted with a field of daffodils and this evoked contemplation, the peace of solitude. Solitude connects with oneself. This should be the response to loneliness. Your work with Native Americans is really around this issue of solitude

D: Initiation and quest.

G: Yes, and this is why what you are doing in your work with Joseph Rael is so important so people can see – “Oh yeah, that makes sense.”

D: Can you speak about hope and renewal? You often write about refounding movements in your books and that is the name of your organization, too.

G: Yes, the Refounding Pastoral Development Unit.

D: Yes, so what about hope?

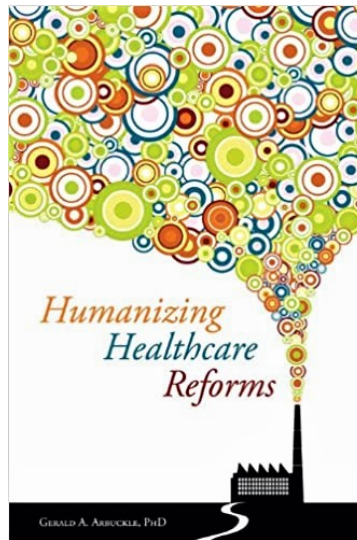
G: I don't know if I mentioned this, but when I had to work with the government here on the future of the public health system, I wondered how I could link in the origins of healthcare with their experience. As you know the division between clinicians and managers is tribal. It can be polarized. So, I worked through the importance of a *founding story* and got them to reflect on what is a founding story of Australia, which they find very difficult to understand because it is too close to them. We began discussing the song, *Waltzing Matilda*, around what that means. Then I got around to, “Ok, do you want to know the founding story of

healthcare?” I used the Good Samaritan story. And it worked, it worked! They started to talk to each other about their experiences and how and why their experiences did not measure up to the founding story. **There is this yearning for roots, and you know this even better than I do. The vital necessity of allowing people to tell a story and to be able to sit with the story not quite sure where the story is going to go to.**

D: In the US we see competing founding stories. There is a *divisive* founding story instead of the *healing* founding story. How would you promote the healing story? How do you help people to find that?

G: If you take the Good Samaritan story, it is not just the Samaritan doing good, having compassion for the victim, there are all kinds of other dynamics in the story that are divisive. To tell the whole story allows people to be aware that the priest and the Levite have got a moral problem. Do they touch the person or don't they? If they touch the person, they are ritually impure. So, there are divisions within the story. Working with groups, I find it challenging – if I have a good facilitator, to allow discussions to develop in safe circumstances where the story, the good Samaritan story, can catalyze the divisiveness within the group. And that is ok. **The divisions are normal, unless they can begin to talk about the divisions, you cannot then lead them onto – “Ok, how can we seek a reconciliation?”** But I think the danger of an anthropologist working in this situation is to get closer too quickly.

D: And for the mental health professional, too, “You just need Prozac!” We can get even earlier closure – pharmacological closure! One of the things I really like in your book, *Humanizing Healthcare Reforms*, is the discussion of the different models or sub-cultures within healthcare. People are often coming from one or two of these core models, like the *economist rationalist* position that all the administrators have, or the *biomedical* model or *foundational* model providers use. They are really different languages, in a sense. The *economic rationalist* language is not a model or language developed to help people heal.



G: Yes, yes! **Whereas dialogue – true dialogue to me seems to be to allow – you have got to give your assumptions.** Listen to what are the assumptions that he or she is working from and you have got to allow, myself also, to examine my assumptions, to hold my judgements until all these assumptions can be put on the table and that takes time and expertise. When you are working with a large group, it is not so easy.

By the way, *The Economist* is brilliant about Trump. Take a look at this [*The Economist*, August 17, 2017, cover features the US president using a white bull horn, but the horn has two eye holes to make it look like a KKK hat].⁵

D: I know! At first you don't see it and then you see the little eyeholes there on the right. *Time Magazine* had one where you couldn't really tell it was him but you could just see someone with sort of weird hair and whose arm is holding up the American flag. You see mostly the American flag but then you see the person's arm going up at an angle like a Nazi salute, and it covers his face so you just see a wave of hair on the top of his head, it is a little bit darker hair, but it is Trump hair, but it is also Hitler hair [*Time Magazine*, August 28, 2017].⁶

G: **The cartoonists can do so much. And when they are silenced, the nation descends.**

D: The oppression and the ridicule of the media really worries me.

G: There is a comment in *The Economist*, **“In a world of increasing fundamentalist movements, of wall-builders, door-slamers, and drawbridge raisers,”**⁷ – that's *The Economist*, the turn of phrase is brilliant English.

⁵ <https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2017-08-19>

⁶ <https://time.com/magazine/us/4904269/august-28th-2017-vol-190-no-8-u-s/>

⁷ Madelaine Drohan. “Liberty Moves North.” *The Economist*. October 29, 2016.