

**A Depth-Psychological Approach to the Current Malaise in American Social,  
Culture and Political Life  
Three Webinars sponsored by the Retreat, Pacifica Graduate Institute**

**Donald E. Kalsched, Ph.D.**

The fiery trial through which we are passing as a nation has its roots in deep traumatic injuries to our personal and collective psyches as a people. These injuries are very difficult for us to confront and metabolize on a personal level and even more difficult to understand and heal collectively. They are simply overwhelming in their cumulative effect, and unbearingly painful when considered individually and in detail. They lead to what Robert J. Lifton called our “national reality disorder” with its distrust of scientific facts, its refusal to acknowledge our underlying racism, denial of the rapidly accelerating Climate disaster, and the “fake news” accusations of the Trump administration, aided and abetted by rampant conspiracy theories.

Depth Psychology has much to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the painful realities that we confront and our primitive defenses against them. Through this understanding we are also made aware of effective ways of healing the current splitting and polarization that are fragmenting our society. In this three-part series, Dr. Kalsched will focus on three aspects of our current polarization and fragmentation: Underlying Racism, Climate-change Denial, and Malignant Nationalism.

**1. Racism and American Democracy: September 25, 2020.** Racism is as old as the Declaration of Independence whose “self-evident truths” did not apply to the Black African slaves that made up much of the nation’s population—especially in the South. When the “inferior” shadow qualities of a person or a people is projected onto the “Other,” the personality is emotionally cleansed of its “badness” and the fantasy of innocence is preserved and consolidated as a “superior” identity in the now-deluded self. The same dynamic was apparent in Hitler’s Germany, but American history shows a particularly virulent strain of such “othering.” Depth Psychology holds the promise of unmasking this disease and pointing the way to its transformation.

**2. Climate-Change Denial and Psychic Numbing: October 16, 2020.** Psychic numbing is a well known psychological defense in the face of the unmanageable extremity of Climate catastrophe—what Tom Singer has called “extinction anxiety.” In the face of the gradual and incremental emergence of climate change it is hard for us to imagine the true horrors—the infinite reaches of death and pain-- that our negligence and inaction will cause future generations. A truly transformed ethical consciousness will be necessary if we are to save the earth and its species for future generations. Depth Psychology may offer crucial insights into the establishment of such a transformed consciousness.

**3. Malignant Nationalism and our ‘America First’ President: Nov. 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.** German chancellor Angela Merkel recently said that “the nation-state alone does not have

a future,” and then, reflecting on her nation’s responsibility for the murder of millions, said further “*that is why I say that this country can only be loved with a broken heart.*” What would it be like for us Americans to love our country “with a broken heart?” What is the ideal at the center of the American experiment that’s worth loving? And what are the failed ideals at the center of that same experiment that require us to let our hearts break. Depth Psychology, which embraces heartbreak as well as the ensouled meaning that comes from its full acknowledgment, has much to contribute to this discussion.