



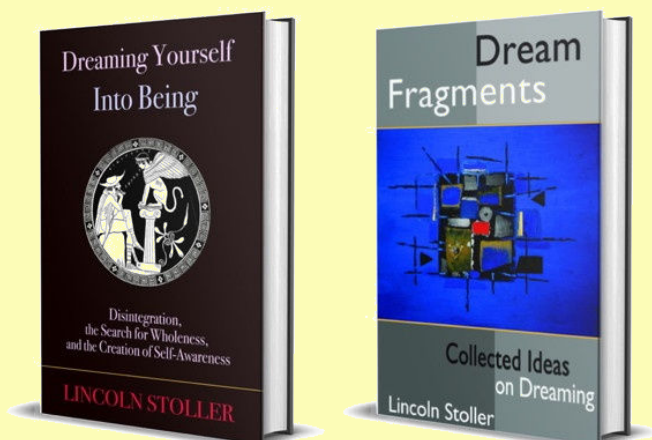
Focusing on Madness

While we tolerate insanity, we won't tolerate people who offend us.

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“Let us consider that we are all partly insane. It will explain us to each other; it will unriddle many riddles; it will make clear and simple many things...” — **Mark Twain**.

Divergence is Not Dysfunctional

This post is about social and collective thought. I previously made the point that people are uncomfortable talking about insanity, and this underlies the stigma it carries. There is a trend to whitewash insanity and cast it as divergent thinking, but this is a thin euphemism. Insanity is not divergent, it's dysfunctional and can be sociopathic. It's more than different, it's destructive.

There is divergent thinking, and it is often beneficial. It refers to new ideas, new perspectives, and thinking along different lines. The notion of divergent thinking is undermined when it's put in the same basket as insanity.

Distinguish these three broad types of thinking: conventional, divergent, and insane. We need the first two and, while we don't need insanity, it can be expected as evolutionarily inevitable. Evolution explores potential opportunities, and if our minds are to change and adapt, then there will always be some that fail.

People avoid discussions of insanity because of its bogeyman character: it's never too far away and always seems possible. Our root fear is that we're insane to some degree. We're unsure of where to draw the line, or whether we're on the right side of it.

There has always been an alternation between sane and insane ideas. The Soviet Union was famous for diagnosing political dissidents as mentally ill, and locking them in mental institutions.

Western psychology has political roots. It has always been employed to certify the right thinkers, and stigmatize the wrong ones. Psychology and education have worked together to blur the line between divergent and dysfunctional thinking.

Superior People

Prejudice always disguises its reasons. Minorities were cast as inferior, women as unintelligent, and the poor as naturally unable. Whether the object of disdain was a race, religion, gender, or class, there was always someone putting forward a logical reason. A psychologist with a psychological assessment often provided the evidence.

“Sanewashing” describes how journalists and their editors downplay dysfunctional thinking. Sanewashing recasts extremely biased ideas as rational in order to soften conclusions that would otherwise alienate readers or advertisers. This again reflects people's aversion to mental disability especially when it arises within the context of divisive topics.

Stigmatizing is the opposite of sanewashing. Both reflect the lack of a clear boundary for sane behavior. Both can be misused for the purpose of avoiding or creating division. Downplaying alternatives discourages people from drawing conclusions and taking sides. Blurring distinctions allays conflict, fosters cohesion, and leads to more complacent attitudes.

Duality Versus Distinction

There is a spiritual cred of “nondualists” who endorse the unity of all. Despite what these nonthinkers say, duality is the foundation of reasoned behavior. Whether you act rationally, emotionally, or symbolically you must contrast ideas, feelings, and options.

Sanewashing is a form of nondual thinking that justifies dysfunctional ideas. In contrast to it, stigmatizing creates prejudice by casting a group of ideas as inherently dangerous. One of these overlooks danger, while the other creates it. Neither would be a problem if people—voters, readers, orators, and consumers—were informed and capable of deciding for themselves. Wherever sanewashing and stigmatizing occur, people are not getting the truth.

Being capable and informed forms the basis of democratic action, whether it be electing leaders, deciding justice, being part of a family, or guiding your future. The informed part requires awareness and connection, while the capable part requires insight and reflection. Both require the setting of boundaries in thought, feeling, and behavior.

Boundaries can be both exclusive or inclusive; they are the foundations of decision making. Your decision making ability is undercut when boundaries are sanewashed away or stigmatized into being. Education is supposed to provide you with the ability to set boundaries. Every consequential decision should be educational.

When Madness Develops

In 2017 thirty five psychologists signed a letter to *The NY Times* questioning Donald Trump’s sanity (Opinion Letter, 2017). The editors sanewashed this warning claiming it was a prejudiced opinion (Friedman 2017). Then, in 2024, another letter by 200 health professionals again warned of Trump’s dangerous mental condition (Glenza 2024). *The NY Times* has defended their reporting of Trump’s cognitive decline, but they have not addressed how this affects his judgments and actions.

In exchange for a January 2026 exclusive interview (NY Times 2026), *The NY Times* returned to sanewashing in its report of Donald Trump’s two hours of unhinged rambling (Empty Wheel 2026). This process of “Times-splaining” is typical of *The NY Times* and similar newspapers. It reflects journalists’ failure to recognize and name insanity.

This is changing. As of yesterday, January 13th, the editors of *The NY Times* unofficially endorsed the opinion that Trump is both deranged and incapable (Edsal 2026). In this piece, the newspaper turned away from a medical assessment to a political opinion. That is, they stopped sanewashing, and began highlighting the consequences of Trump’s irrational statements.

“On topic after topic, President Trump made clear that he would be the arbiter of any limits to his authorities, not international law or treaties.” — **Sanger, et al.** (2026)

What is important is that rather than diluting the issue of leadership to the level of partisan opinion or academic psychology, they are elevating the issue to the level of economists and, most importantly, civility.

Reaching the Civic Limit

Political opinions are divisive, medical opinions are relative, but civility is universal. When a person is indicted for being unpleasant, there is little room for disagreement. Granted, Trump was always unpleasant. This was the signature quality that got him elected. But he was presented as being unpleasant to “the right people.” Now, he is being presented as offensive to everyone, and because of this, everyone can move against him.

Recall the Red Scare of the 1950s that was led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Countless lives, professions, and businesses were injured or ruined by this years-long episode of entirely fabricated social psychosis. The Red Scare’s lies, forgeries, and injustices didn’t stimulate any kind of sane, social immune reaction. Instead, they became campaign issues that empowered some and elected others.

It was not until McCarthy was recognized as being uncivil that his four year reign came to an end. That is, it was not until he was seen as unpleasant to the average, uninformed person that his platform became unacceptable.

“Joseph McCarthy's downfall was triggered by his reckless accusations against the U.S. Army during televised Army-McCarthy hearings in 1954, where his bullying tactics, lack of evidence, and exposure of forged documents, particularly by lawyer Joseph Welch's famous ‘Have you no sense of decency?’ question, turned public opinion and led to his Senate censure for misconduct, ending his power.” — **Google A.I. summary**

Public perception of Donald Trump has reached the point where his uncivil behavior is being held against him. He is now offensive to everyone. Objections to his rule will become nonpartisan. His demise will be interesting and will come as a relief. I predict he will be removed before the end of 2026.

You Would Not Be So Foolish

I'm not trying to convince you that Donald Trump is deranged. You already knew that. I'm saying, first, that collective opinion follows what people agree on, and second, that what people agree on is based not on facts, but accepted behavior.

You reject Donald Trump's behavior, but I doubt you have clear boundaries regarding the less dramatic, dysfunctional behavior of yourself and those around you.

More personally, if you accept the behavior of other people on the basis of their being nice, then you are not making intelligent, informed decisions. If you cannot recognize a dysfunctional person until they exhibit antisocial behavior, then it will require a psychopath to open your eyes.

The alternative is to develop discernment and clear boundaries. Until you do that, you will learn by error, and the errors that accrue from failing to recognize even minor levels of insanity are serious. I believe we're all obliged to improve in this regard, and I speak from experience.

“I shook my head at what I saw as this man's almost pathological ability to compartmentalize the madness he likely played a role in and the quaint, pastoral life he led at the same time.”

— **Shalom Auslander** (2026), referring to the 1943 diary of an ordinary German soldier

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