

ELECTION DAY

For Morgne Cramer

[E]ven in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination . . . such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.

Hannah Arendt

Election Day. I turn on the radio and hear Israel Kamakawiwo sing “Over the Rainbow” and burst into tears. What will become of us? The day is warm, the sky an azure blue, like that of September 11; the yellow leaves glitter in the liquid sun poured over them. I vote in midday, among the elderly. In the evening, as I watch the flickering needle of the *Times* Election Poll, it quickly becomes evident that Clinton will lose.

What happened?

The worst. The Presidency, Senate, House, Court, and most states lost. I will not attempt to analyze this disaster; the many others who have opined for months will do so with confidence. I will only put down a few thoughts, for better or worse. The election is the result of a decades-long degradation of our democratic society; the now-acknowledged impoverishment of the white working-class by the very people they voted in power; an endemic racism; sexism; identity politics blind to its own prejudices; and a deliberate manipulation of the electronic media by distortion, rumor and lies. Plots: Putin and Assange; James Comey. I am outraged. I am again the truth-telling man who wrote:

I will name the hypocrites,
the liars, the treasonous self-deceiving
occupiers who seized my emerald youth,
making me an immigrant in my own house.
I will rise and throw them out.

I read Astrid Lindgren's *War Diaries 1939-1945* and am reminded of the disaster that may befall nations. World War II was a war against civilian populations, waged by starvation. The eradication of Jews was an open secret. I dream a concerto that gathers the spirit of the four Nordic countries—Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. A baritone holds an impossibly long, heartbreaking note. I dream my recurring dream of packing up and attempting to return to a home I cannot find.

Swastikas begin to appear.

I remember the early days of the AIDS epidemic, when the Reagan administration did nothing while thousands died, and there was open talk of rounding up gay men and putting us in camps. When the Waffen SS arrive in America, they will be wearing blue windbreakers emblazoned with the yellow letters FBI.

Everything that is real or authentic is [being] assaulted by the overwhelming power of "mere talk" that irresistibly arises out of the public realm, determining every aspect of everyday existence, anticipating or annihilating the sense or the nonsense of everything the future may bring.

Hannah Arendt

Shortly after the first debate, I shut off my radio and limited my news reading to print. Since then I have been living in silence, having thrown out my television decades ago. At first I did so to withdraw from the noise of discord and opinion which demands continual response, and to quiet myself. As the days became weeks and months, I noticed a deepening of my experience. “You are living through an unusual time,” Henri Nouwen wrote. “You see that you are called to go toward solitude, prayer, hiddenness, and simplicity.” I say little of this to others. I have ceased to live as a captive audience, subject to manipulation, intimidation, excitement, and threat. I have made my choice. I *will* vote, but something has changed. I am learning to live in dark times, attentive and calm.

“How are you doing,” a friend has asked. “A victory for such a fascist and bully can trigger anyone with an abuse history. Millions have been violated by men like Trump and his cohorts. I keep thinking about the poem you wrote, ‘Politics.’ The abusers are rewarded, leaving their victims to carry the burden of depression and rage. How are those victims doing now?” More than one of Trump’s accusers burst into tears on her molester’s election.

Hence, when we talk about lying, and especially about lying among active men, let us remember that the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness. Moral outrage, for this reason alone, is not likely to make it disappear.

Hannah Arendt

I am surprised by how many times I have heard myself say “I am shocked” during this election. By the calumny and lies, of course. By the undisguised and repugnant display of public officials seeking power, who equivocate in the face of the civic evil which has been unleashed and who lack all shame. Worst, by Christians. Why am I surprised by my shock? I should have anticipated no less than the hypocritical exercise of their faith.

I once worked at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Presided over by Joe Nye, author of the influential book, *Soft Power*, the School was a glittering jewel in the diadem of Neo-Liberalism. World leaders and presidential candidates came and went. Faculty shuttled from Cambridge to Washington, serving one administration or another, targeting missiles and formulating policy. Invitations to Davos were eagerly sought. Around its Penthouse tables might sit (and I know, I was in the room) a prime minister, a director of a national foundation, a donor, and a columnist, whose op-ed would dutifully appear in the *New York Times*. Amid this wealth were the early signs of the era’s collapse twenty years later. Several of the School’s faculty had quit Clinton’s first administration when he gutted welfare, increasing the poverty of many who would later reject what Bill and Hillary came to represent: a deplorable state.

“As you predicted,” a friend wrote, “I have been asked for help. Many of those where I live are Muslim and many Hispanic—some undocumented. We have a significant immigrant population. I have become immediately concerned because they have reported that the local police have been rude and hard. This terrifies me. We plan to continue to protest and we will.” I walk past the windows of a local college, covered with messages.

How flimsy these pieces of paper seem, taped to an easily smashed pane of glass. Such hope.

It is the function, however, of all action, as distinguished from mere behavior, to interrupt what otherwise would have proceeded automatically and therefore predictably.

Hannah Arendt

It is impossible to foresee how I will live or what decisions I will be called on to make. Every action I take, no matter how small, must now come from a place of resistance, even as I watch others accommodate and, by their example, encourage accommodation. Knowing myself, I fear the worst—avoidance, self-interest, cowardice. Arendt suggests that true friendship arises from a hatred of the world in which others are treated inhumanely. (Mockery, violence, racial epithet, sexual abuse. Registration, internment, deportation. The Wall.) If so, then resistance starts when I choose to act generously to those who suffer around me. I will continue to live in hidden silence, looking for the opportunity to give in the hope that I will not flinch from what will be asked. I will take care whom I serve.

How are you? my friend asked. Stronger, thank you.

David M. Eberly
November 20, 2016

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