

Empty culture needs connection

Almost everyone I've talked with since November is deeply uneasy about our future as a nation, as a people, and as a society of individuals. Many of us are looking for effective ways to move forward, toward securing democracy and overcoming the disparities and antagonisms that divide our country.

Along these lines, I found CITY's last two editorials — on the economic struggles that led some voters to vote for change at any cost and on the fragility of American democracy — insightful and important.

Analyses are easier than solutions, but awareness is a good place to start. As several commentators have pointed out, this has been the silver lining of the Trump "victory": a rekindling of civic spirit, a deeper understanding of our divisions, and an enlargement of the scope of concern for those left behind in America's model of success pre-Trump.

Who knows if we will get a chance to build meaningfully on this upsurge in consciousness, but we can try.

CITY also recently had a feature on heroin addiction. The degree of emptiness and despair driving our epidemic of substance abuse and overdosing might also explain some of the collective rage that Trump rode to power. Similarly, he's likely to be just another fast fix that leads to more emptiness and devastation in the body politic.

Handwringing is not very useful right now, and heightened sensitivity to others can only go so far if one of the threats facing American civil society is a president who aspires to authoritarian dictatorship. But it's still vital to reach out and interact with others of all sorts; the more different from oneself and the more genuinely one reaches, the better.

Connecting with like-minded souls is great for support and organizing, but connecting with those outside your comfort zone can lead to surprising bonds and unexpectedly renew life's sense of meaning. Of course, people will not always want to reach back and may even want to hit back, but that's up to them.

And what of our culture more generally? Shallow, fragmented, increasingly virtual, corporate-managed, consumption-oriented, addicted to sensation, with people defining identity by what they buy and which celebrities they like, etc.

We're all a part of this in some way. We might consider how such a culture contributes to a general emptiness, to being distracted and out of touch with each other, and how such a culture eventually deals us a Trump for president.

I don't underestimate how bad things could get. Trump's presidency might become a time when standing up for democratic principles and human dignity requires great courage. For certain segments of our society, it has already been that way for a long time.

Meanwhile, we can still work on changing ourselves and on the culture we create. Part of the solution must be in organizing, but an equally powerful portion must be the cultivation and practice of values that run counter to those of the prevailing culture: interacting with the world and with others in ways that are more personal, genuine, challenging, but also more fulfilling.

It will take more active engagement to integrate our deepest values effectively into the social fabric and to keep the American experiment, the world as we know it, viable.

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