

AFTERMATH OF ELECTION

and anticipating the inauguration of the new regime

Patrick McMahon

Walking back from the Berkeley Zendo, early that first morning after most election results were in, I was put in mind of a similar morning, walking down Mission Street in San Francisco to catch the bus which would take me to my job. I had just come from the first morning of Rohatsu sesshin at San Francisco Zen Center—this 1971— and enjoying the exception of being free of the usual schedule, a privilege granted by the authorities, judging me to be an “essential worker.” (Companion to an autistic boy.) I’d left behind a grieving sangha which had just heard announced at service the death of our abbot, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. People were weeping in the halls but I myself felt no particular loss. It’s not that I was indifferent to the man. I’d met him the summer of ’68 at Tassajara, and again in Portland at a sesshin a year later, when it was just getting clear that he was very sick. I’d spoken with him several times, found him agreeable and thoroughly ordinary. (For all that, I remember every encounter in exquisite detail.) The first chance I had, I went south to study at SFZC, where I found a thriving practice, a number of inspirational older students and gung ho younger ones like myself, and a rigorous daily schedule which suited my post-hippie chaotic confusion perfectly. In the six months I was there before Roshi died, I’d come to feel the sangha as important—at least as much—as the teacher, so when he passed that morning it didn’t seem, as I say, a great loss.

I suppose it was being out on the street, in “the world,” that allowed me the room to let this carefree mood develop, and what I found was that it quickly developed into joy. I didn’t analyze but couldn’t deny it, even though it didn’t seem to be quite in line with what I should be feeling. No doubt being out of the darkened meditation hall and into the light and air had something to do with it. It was indeed a splendid morning in the city, the streets swept clean by last night’s

wind which continued to blow leaves and trash down the street. Along with the joy, and maybe the same thing, I keenly felt my freedom, the freedom of being with all beings: bus drivers stopping and going, shop keepers opening their shops, the homeless—not as many then—in doorways and on the sidewalk trying to sleep, stay warm, or up and pushing their carts of worldly possessions; the office workers hurrying by to their worldly work. A motley sangha! But this morning, mine. And maybe I also could touch the fundamental truth that has kept me in the zen game all this time, that abiding happiness doesn't depend on anything, other than turning, turning, turning to what's real.

53 years later I have this joyful, liberated sense as I walk home from the Berkeley Zendo, election results now certain. It's a walk I make to and fro nearly daily and I've come to recognize the characters who are out for their own reasons: walking dogs, children going to school, the gentleman who sits outside his retirement residence in his wheelchair, facing the rising sun, or raising it, as we joke, or the cloud cover with no sun when he fails, no matter. I exchange hellos with one and all, and most return them. If the mood of openness seems not to be entirely shared, I have no doubt my emancipation proclamation can't help but extend the goodness all around. That goodness—at least in liberal Berkeley—especially needs to spread around after last night's election, announcing the election of Donald Trump, and the probable ascendancy of Republicans into both branches of Congress. It's a bad dream from which we aren't going to awaken soon. Things aren't going to be as usual come January, in fact they may never be as usual in the repercussions of the coming four years. As I learn in the days since that first morning, we are shocked, scared, angry, and bereft of hope. It's as though democracy itself has died. And yet I feel this inexplicable joy.

I especially note the early workers, who happen in my part of the world to be Latinos, who daily get going so impossibly early, by 7:30. Lately there's been a project underway to pour a driveway and the guys are wheelbarrowing gravel for a sub-base. In the upper dimensions, roofers are at it, preparing for the coming rains, and I see one nimble fellow ascending a ladder maybe 30 feet up. I'm glad it's not me, as I climb no ladders these days and never one as long as his. I want

to yell up to him, “Be careful,” but don’t wish to distract him. I reflect that in the coming time and the unpredictably dire climate of limited social and medical services, there might be no ambulance to carry him to a hospital if he falls, there might not be hospitals for illegals, for it’s likely he’s not legal. Or what’s also likely, he and his undocumented co-laborers—for they are mostly undocumented—will have been deported. Thinking selfishly, we’ll be in a fine pickle with “them” gone and few of “us” left likely to take their places. No roofs maintained, no driveways ... and on and on. How is it that the leaders and their followers don’t see the calamity of their xenophobia! They’ll be sorry. We’ll all be sorry.

But my thoughts don’t run too long in these grooves. I know it is all too easy to fall into them, as I hear from pessimistic conversations with friends and strangers since, from listening to the radio. I thank myself that I don’t subject myself to television, or worse, from what I gather, the media. If I have any part in holding the sand fort against the oncoming waves, it’s in spreading the gospel—the good news—of this new morning. Of every new morning. Soon I’ll be out in the work world, plying my own trade as a landscaper, and that, too, will be my best shot at keeping going the 99.9% of this world that is promising, continuous, beautiful. The .1 % I don’t know—many of us won’t know for a while— what to do about. We can’t know yet. We don’t need to know. Who knows anything about anything? I don’t, that’s for certain. And the joyful mood? Surely that will fade into another workday, or maybe another tomorrow, but then, I remember that elation 53 years ago. Regimes come and go. Hope and fear come and go. Something there is that endures. Freedom endures. Free of Trump or Harris, fascism or democracy, failing thriving economies, changing climates, war and peace. Free of hope, free of fear. Free even of the Triple Treasure of Buddha, Dharma Sangha. Free to meet circumstances dead on and live, in the zendo, out on the street, up on the roof.

Don’t fall!

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