

The Soul of a Patriot – On Being/Krista Tippett

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I first heard about “the soul” as a child. For years, I thought of it as a wispy spirit within me, well-intentioned but too frail for life’s rough-and-tumble.

Then I had my first experience of depression, a darkness partly of my own making.* During my long months underground, the powers I depended on — intellect, emotions, ego, and will — proved useless. My mind became my enemy, my feelings went numb, my sense of self was annihilated, my willpower reduced to nil. Every one of my normal supports collapsed under the weight of my life.

But now and then I sensed the presence of an original core of self that knows how to persist in hard times, the grounded, gritty life-force that gives “soul music” its name. As my other powers failed me, this core — as savvy and sinewy as a wild animal — helped me survive, then thrive. There’s much I don’t know about this primal wildness I came to call my soul, but I know this: it loves life and light, and it’s fierce in confronting us with the truth about how we got lost in the dark.

Recently, I’ve been lost in the dark again. This time, it’s a darkness more political than personal, a darkness we *all* helped to create. That includes people like me who were so cocksure we knew the score that we couldn’t be bothered to look, listen, and learn outside our cultural comfort zones.

On January 20, 2017, the country I love will inaugurate a man who embodies many of our culture’s most soulless traits: adolescent impulsiveness, an unbridled drive for wealth and power, a taste for violence, nonstop narcissism, and massive arrogance. A man who has maligned women, Mexicans, Muslims, African Americans, immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, and Mother Earth — a man who’d sooner deny the obvious than apologize for the outrageous — will become President of the United States.

How do I stay engaged and whole on the shadow side of democracy? I’ve been putting that question to my soul, and the response has been unnerving. It seems I’m being called to become a “patriot,” a word I scrapped years ago when it was co-opted by the “God, Guns, Guts, and Glory” gang. But a passage about patriotism by pastor/activist William Sloane Coffin — who spoke in the voice of the soul — has me looking for ways to reclaim that word for myself:

There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with the world.

What would it mean to have a “lover’s quarrel” with my country right now, animated by the fierce love my soul would affirm? So far, I’ve come up with four answers.

First, it must be a quarrel about what is and isn’t true. The president-elect’s enablers have proclaimed truth passé. To cite three of them:

“There’s no such thing...anymore of facts.”

—Scottie Nell Hughes

"You [journalists take] everything...so literally. The American people...[understand] that sometimes [like at a bar] you're going to say things [with no] facts to back it up."

—Corey Lewandowski

"You [reporters] always want to go by what's come out of his mouth..."

—Kellyanne Conway

We who hold the quaint belief that it's often possible to tell whether what comes out of a mouth is true or false need to assert the facts every chance we get. Last week, for example, the man who says that only he can save our economy claimed that there are "96 million...wanting a job [who] can't get [one]." False. There are "roughly 96 million people not in the labor force, but that includes retirees, students and others who don't want jobs. Only 5.5 million of them want work." The unemployment rate, which neared ten percent every month of 2010, was five percent or less every month of 2016.

Facts are so tedious, aren't they? And they won't change the minds of true believers. But we need to preserve them for the same reason Medieval monasteries preserved books: the torches have come to town. Let's try to remember that science and the Enlightenment gave us ways to test the truth-claims of potentates and prelates, laying the foundations for our little experiment in democracy. Until someone blows up the lab, we must proclaim the facts, then tuck them into a fireproof vault until we need them again.

Second, we must engage in civil discourse across political divides, without compromising our convictions. That's been a daunting task to date, it's going to get even harder for a while, and we're not very good at it. But this much is clear: for dialogue to succeed, participants must have *something* in common.

I believe we have all kinds of shared interests. We breathe the same air, use the same roads and bridges, depend on the same institutions, and must find ways to live in harmony for the sake of our children and grandchildren. But appeals to the obvious have yet to bring us together. So my hope lies in a shared condition that isn't yet with us, but soon will be, I believe.

The president-elect has a history of leaving people holding the bag. Witness his "university," which recently settled two no-fault [*sic*] federal class-action lawsuits to compensate ex-students to the tune of \$25 million. Sooner or later, this president will leave many more people holding an even bigger bag, people who voted for him trusting he'd solve their problems.

When he fails to deliver, people who were political enemies in 2016 will find common ground, and a Coalition of the Disillusioned will become possible. I'm disillusioned by the shell game that took this man to the White House. People who supported him because he promised to bring back lost jobs, revive the middle class, restore law and order, and kill ISIS will become disillusioned soon enough. That prediction brings me no joy, but it seems highly likely.

When the common ground of "We've been had!" makes dialogue possible, it will give people like me a chance to do what we've failed to do in the past: listen openly to the alienation felt by that segment of the president-elect's base who voted for him because they felt unheard. We're now in a better position to understand their sense of diminishment because we feel diminished, too.

Third, this lover's quarrel needs to surface what's *not* being said. This is a form of fierce-love truth-telling as critical to the health of our civic relationships as it is in our intimate relationships.

Amid all the talk about the “why” of the election results, we’ve not talked enough about the fact that, by mid-century, over half of U.S. citizens will be people of color. After 250 years, we’re at the beginning of the end of white dominance in this country. It’s no coincidence that white votes were key to the election, nor that white nationalists and supremacists rallied so enthusiastically to the winner’s banner, with precious little push-back from him.

We’re either in the death throes of a culture of white supremacy, or resuming our unfinished American Civil War. Either way, we who care about the fate of this land and all who live in it need to invoke the soul’s help in trying to steer these death-dealing energies toward life-giving outcomes.

Finally, if it’s going to be a *lover’s* quarrel, we need to keep the love alive. Paradoxically, this means remembering that this country we love has forever fallen short of its own values and visions. I can truly love another person only if I don’t romanticize him or her. The same is true of loving my country.

The next time you hear the fanciful notion that we must make America great *again*, think slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, the New Jim Crow, the Great Depression, Vietnam, Joe McCarthy, Iraq, homelessness and hunger, the greed-driven financial meltdown of 2008, and much, much more. Then note how we double down on our illusions by claiming that we are “a shining city upon a hill.”

In that sense, this “post-truth presidency,” with all its moral deformations, is nothing new. The country I love is inherently flawed, as are all human constructs and all human beings. That’s why our flawed founders placed the endless task of seeking a “more perfect Union” at the heart of the American agenda. January 20, 2017, is not when “things fall apart” in the U.S. It’s one more in a long history of such moments. We’ve overcome before, and if we love our democracy as fiercely as we should, we can overcome again.

I won’t be watching the Inauguration. I’ll be launching a weekend retreat with hospital chaplains, people devoted to healing, as millions of Americans are. But as the country I love inaugurates a man who does not even vaguely resemble the “better angels of our nature,” I’ll be reciting a line that’s served me well since grade school: “You’re not the boss of me.”

Those words remind me that among my unalienable rights is the freedom to follow my soul instead of my leaders, if in doing so I serve the common good. They also encourage me to persist in my lover’s quarrel with my country, as a patriot must.

* *Author’s Note:* My depression was more situational than genetic or biochemical, and what helped me may not be helpful to others. When I write about it, I am not trying to describe all depressions, which take various forms. Nor am I “romanticizing” depression, as if it’s a school of the spirit I’d recommend. I’m simply describing my experience and what I learned from it.