

Parallel Lives, Nov 20th, 2016

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I have to make a confession: I have not been coping well with the idea that our country is about to be run by a bunch of people whose ideas are antithetical to everything I believe is good, true and important.

I keep wondering what it means to be American. What values do we share? Are there any values we all share, or are we just a collection of people who live in the same physical space but completely different worlds?

How is it that half of the people in this country are living in a reality I don't even recognize? We saw this during the campaign as one candidate said, essentially, "the U.S. is in terrible shape and must be completely overhauled," while the other said, "Look at all the ways we're doing well ... the ways the economy is improving, and most people are safer and better off than they used to be." And apparently the people in this country are split almost evenly between these two wildly different realities.

In one moment, I can say to myself, "Politics are a seesaw. The election this year is a momentary reaction, and it will swing back. The arc of the universe bends toward justice."

And the next moment, I'm back in despair about what it means to have as our leader someone who has endorsed, and been endorsed by, white supremacists; someone who appointed an "alt-right" spokesperson as his chief strategist. I

despair at all of the many possible paths forward that lead to a future straight out of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, or any of the post-apocalyptic novels I used to call fiction.

For the last 10 days or so, I have just been trying to imagine a path forward that doesn't lead to apocalypse, either a cultural apocalypse in the U.S. or a literal one created by someone who thinks atomic bombs were made to be used. Or, more likely, that our new leaders turn the country over to the oil companies, the pipeline owners and the coal-fired power plants, blowing right past the point where it might still have been possible to limit global climate change.

When your new leader appoints to his transition team a fox to guard every henhouse, what can the hens do to survive?

So that's what I've been thinking about.

Here's what I *don't* believe:

I don't believe that we're all in God's hands and God will make everything okay in the end. That this is all part of some cosmic plan too big and too complex for us to understand.

I don't believe that our current situation is merely another swing of the pendulum and all we have to do is sit tight, watch a little TV, and wait for the midterm elections.

I don't believe it's whining or being a "bad loser" to worry that we're heading to an apocalyptic future.

I don't believe that every person who voted for our president-elect is an evil, racist person.

I don't believe we are powerless. People who believe that every person has inherent worth and dignity might not be IN power, but people of conscience can always find some path for action.

So, what DO I believe?

I believe that small actions make a difference, and many small actions together can change history.

I believe that there are more people with kind, loving hearts and good intentions than there are cruel, selfish people.

I believe that our salvation lies in mobilizing those kind, loving people to take many small actions together, and to keep acting for love and justice no matter what.

It has been interesting — in the Chinese-curse sense of the word, "May you live in interesting times" — to watch the campaign rhetoric and the post-campaign brouhaha.

During the debates, as I listened to the two major candidates describe conditions in the U.S. as being essentially great or completely horrible, I kept thinking, “How can these be descriptions of the same country?”

How can people be having such completely different experiences of very similar conditions and events?

The truth is, we do that every day.

If you’re not sure, ask a friend who belongs to a minority group, whether that is people of color, or people who are disabled, or those who have a different sexual orientation or gender identity. Think about the vast gulf between the accounts from different people who were present on the scene of a police shooting. Some of that is people justifying their own behavior, as we all do, but much of it is a result of all the different experiences each of them had going into the encounter, and how those past experiences color what they see in the moment.

We live in these parallel realities all the time. Even when you’re standing right next to another person, living in the same physical world, the two of you will experience it differently.

There was a time, about 10 years ago, when my husband and I were living in parallel realities. I was going through a stressful time on the Lovejoy ISD school board, trying to pull out of a long depression, struggling to build up a freelance writing business and take care of our 13-year-old daughter.

My husband Paul, meanwhile, was a sustainability rock star: He had led the project that created the world’s first certified energy-efficient semiconductor

manufacturing facility, and he was being featured in news stories and asked to speak at conferences all over the world. His bosses respected and appreciated him.

Numerous times, as we took our dog on walks in the evening, he would say to me, “We have the best life! I feel so lucky.”

I could acknowledge that he was right, but to be honest, I wasn’t feeling it. By all objective standards, we were — and ARE — extraordinarily fortunate. But I wasn’t feeling it. I could see our good fortune and appreciate it intellectually, but I didn’t feel it.

So maybe I can use that experience to sympathize a little with someone who sees other people doing well, but feels like her own life is terrible ... and maybe that person, when she’s stranded on the side of the road because her 20-year-old car just died and her boss fired her because she couldn’t get to work, can’t help but think the smug lady who just drove by in a fancy Prius is somehow to blame.

You might have had experiences this week when you were feeling terrified and at risk ... when you looked around at the people you work with and wondered which of them supported building a wall, or instituting a Muslim registry. Did one of my co-workers actually think it would be okay to go beat up people who happen to be gay or brown or black.

Guess what? Your whole life, you’ve been living side by side with people who had to think about those questions every day. Those hidden and not-so-hidden

threats are not new to people of color or people who are visibly different, whether it's because they're in gender transition or because they wear a hijab.

Parallel universes are all around us. In one sense, each person is a parallel universe. That's a really valuable thing for us to remember so we can keep an open mind and an open heart.

So what's the appropriate way to respond to the world we find ourselves in?

First, and always, I beg you not to normalize our current situation. Don't accept it as the new status quo. Don't be the one who "goes along" so you don't upset anyone.

Next, take a lesson from Douglas Wood, author of our Message for All Ages today, and take a moment every day to be grateful for the little things.

Gratitude is fuel for your emotional engine. Even after the worst day, after the darkest and coldest night, the sun will rise in the morning. Find something every day to be grateful for, so that you have a reason and the strength to fight.

Gratitude doesn't depend on things going well. Gratitude is a choice you make. The best example I've ever known was a dear friend who was caring for her parents in their final illnesses. For a few years, she was under unimaginable stress, as an only child, trying to care for both of her parents as they went through surgeries, cognitive decline, middle-of-the-night emergencies ... and yet, through it all and even after they died, every time I saw her, she said, "I'm so grateful to have had such loving parents." "I'm grateful that they have the resources to pay for good care." "I feel so lucky to have had such close relationships with my parents." Most people would have focused on the

burden. In fact, I probably would have been curled up, sobbing under a blanket somewhere. But my friend got through each day by finding something in her life to be grateful for.

Gratitude can make your engine run, but then you have to drive it somewhere. Take small but concrete steps to defend your values. These are important. Just as millions of tiny raindrops can flood a river, if we all take small steps we can together create big change.

Michael Phillips and Betsy Friauf are wonderful examples of how to make concrete steps, big and small. One event I remember from the last year was when a group of local anti-Islam gun aficionados announced plans to harass worshippers arriving for prayers at a mosque. Michael and Betsy, along with some other good-hearted protectors, went to the mosque and stood between the protestors and their targets. They walked families through the gate.

This kind of safe presence is exactly what I want to be. It's why I'm wearing a safety pin, in spite of the backlash that idea has generated from people pointing out that wearing a safety pin isn't – by itself – actually an action. But it can be a signal to others that I'm ready to help and a reminder to myself that I have to step up when someone around me is being threatened or harrassed.

Rev. Maureen Killoran, a UU minister who was in Texas for a time and currently serves a congregation in Florida, shared these 12 Steps from *New York Times* writer Nicholas Kristof:

“Traumatized by the election results, many Americans are asking: What now? Here are steps that any of us can take that can make a difference at the margins. Onward!

1. I WILL accept that my side lost, but I won't acquiesce in injustice and I will gird for battle on issues I care about. I will call or write my member of Congress and express my opposition to mass deportation, to cutting 22 million people off health insurance, to nominations of people who are unqualified or bigoted, to reduced access to contraception and cancer screenings. Better yet, I'll attend my representative's town meeting and put him or her on the spot.

2. I WILL try to do small things in my own life, recognizing that they are inadequate but at least a start: I will sign up on the Council on American-Islamic Relations website, volunteering to fight Islamophobia. I'll call a local mosque to offer support, or join an interfaith event. I will sign up for an “accompany my neighbor” list if one exists for my area, to be an escort for anyone who is now in fear.

3. I WILL avoid demonizing people who don't agree with me about this election, recognizing that it's as wrong to stereotype Trump supporters as anybody else. I'll remind myself that no side has a monopoly on truth and that many Trump supporters are good people who want the best for the country. The left already has gotten into trouble for condescending to working-class people, and insulting all Trump supporters as racists simply magnifies that problem.

4. I'LL DO my part to support the society I'd like to see. I'll eat Chobani yogurt because its owner has been subjected to racist attacks for his willingness to hire and promote refugees. Likewise, I will give blood and register for organ donation — for at least they'll make me feel better. As will a tub of Chobani.

5. I WILL support groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center that fight hate groups, and back the center's petition calling on Donald Trump to disavow bigotry. Depending on my interests, I'll support an immigration rights group, the A.C.L.U. or Planned Parenthood. And I'll subscribe to a newspaper as one way of resisting efforts to squelch the news media or preside over a post-fact landscape — and also to encourage journalists to be watchdogs, not lap dogs.

6. I WILL support refugees, one of the most demonized groups in the world. The International Rescue Committee's work for refugees can for the first time be supported through donations to The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. In many cities in America and abroad, volunteer can help refugees through this I.R.C. portal.

7. I WON'T let it slide if a friend makes degrading comments about a minority or women. Even if it's over Thanksgiving dinner, I'll push back and say something like: "Come on! You really think that?!" Similarly, I

may not be able to prevent a sexual predator from reaching the White House, but at events I attend, I may be able to prevent a sexual predator from assaulting a drunken partygoer.

8. I WILL resist dwelling in an echo chamber. I will follow smart people on Twitter or Facebook with whom I disagree. I will also try to enlarge my social circle to include people with different views, recognizing that diversity is a wonderful thing — and that if I know only Clinton supporters, then I don't have a clue about America.

9. I WILL do what I can in my own life to make sure that the needy aren't forgotten in the next four years amid paroxysms of tax cuts for the wealthy. I can support Reach Out and Read, an outstanding program that helps at-risk kids learn to read: A \$20 donation covers one child for a year, or one can serve as a reader. Or I can be a Big Brother or Big Sister or help through iMentor.

10. I WILL understand that progress may unfold at the state or local level, and I will engage there. It's encouraging that voters in four states passed minimum wage measures, and in three states approved gun safety measures, while other states and localities are wrestling with climate change. And, of course, a starting point is to get my friends to vote.

11. I WILL take on sexism and misogyny, which in forms like domestic violence, sexual assault and sex trafficking affect women and girls across the country. Even today, Republicans and Democrats should be able to work together to get funding for women's shelters or to prosecute pimps.

12. I WILL not lose hope. I will keep reminding myself that politics zigs and zags, and that I can do more than shout in the wind. I can fight for my values even between elections, and even at the micro level I can mitigate the damage to my neighbors and attempt to heal a social fabric that has been rent.

So those are 12 steps for practical, hopeful action. And when you just need courage and sympathy, you have us. We have each other.

Antoine de St Exupery said, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

He wrote that in the manuscript for *The Little Prince*, composed and illustrated during World War II while he was in the United States to plead with President Roosevelt that the U.S. get involved and help liberate occupied France.

At a time of tremendous destruction and danger, St. Exupery wrote about recognizing what is truly important: about the bonds of friendship and responsibility. About the value of caring for another life, whether that is a little prince or one unique and precious rose.

If you watch the movie of *The Little Prince* that's on Netflix right now — and I recommend you do — remember that the story underlying it was written by someone who had just left occupied France to seek help during a war. Even in the midst of violence, hunger, cruelty and privation, he could remind us that the most essential truth is that we must take care of each other. The little prince protects his rose and digs up tiny baobab sprouts before they can destroy his asteroid, and those are the responsibilities that give his life meaning.

We grownups sometimes lose sight of what is truly essential, and that makes us lose heart. I am not minimizing the importance of national politics and trying to make a difference in our institutions.

But the biggest difference we can make is one on one, showing love and compassion to one person at a time. We can belong to each other, protect one rose, pull up destructive baobab sprouts on our own little plots of earth.

Belonging to a community like this one gives me heart. We belong to each other.

Our job now is to keep reminding each other what is truly important: to see with the heart. To look at this country and recognize that what makes it unique in all the world isn't the bureaucrats and the businessmen or even our democratic institutions, important as those are.

What makes us unique is our ability to reach beyond boundaries, to step across the gulf separating our different realities and see into each other's hearts.

People in this country have a tremendous capacity to step up and help each other in times of crisis. Day to day, maybe not so much, but when the tornado touches down or the flood waters rise up, people do heroic things to save their neighbors — even the ones who don't look like them.

If we can allow ourselves to belong to each other, to take care of each other, then the forces of hate and destruction can never win ... not really.

Take courage, my friends. All we can do is to love and protect each other — and the great blessing is that that's all we *have* to do.