

# The Night of and the Mourning After: Truth and Transference in the Election of Donald Trump

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## Abstract

The writer presents an autoethnographic account of the night of the 2016 presidential election and the days and months that followed. Tormented by the prospect of Donald Trump's election, he expresses the feelings of gloom and doom that permeate the academic convention he is attending as he and colleagues from around the country respond to the menacing prospect of a Donald Trump presidency. Invited to speak at a postelection riff, he contemplates the ways in which Trump served as an ideal transference object for many White working-class people, providing a kind of heroic self-validation they lack. In the concluding sections of the article, he focuses on the question of Trump's heralded "authenticity" during the campaign and the tyrannical threat posed by Trump's failure to care about truth.

## Keywords

autoethnography, ethnography, authenticity, truth, Trump

## Sunday, November 6, 2016

I post the following message on *Facebook*. "Tune in Tuesday night to watch *Death of a Salesman*. It's going to be huge."

"I sure hope so, and not just a win but a decisive one," one of my *Facebook* friends replies. "Yes, let us hope that it is huge," writes another friend.

## Election Day, November 8, 2016

Finally, the day I have been waiting for arrives. For several months, I have immersed myself in nearly every detail written or broadcast about the election. Each morning, I log on to *The New York Times's* "Upshot," *Real Clear Politics* (RCP), *fivethirtyeight.com*, *Huffington Post's* "Pollster," and my personal favorite, Sam Wang's *The Princeton Election Consortium* (PEC). Over the past 10 years, Professor Wang has an unrivaled record of accurately predicting election results from aggregated state poll results.

"It is totally over," he declares on his website on November 4. "If Trump wins more than 240 electoral votes, I will eat a bug" (Wang, 2016). Other analysts are not as certain, especially Nate Silver (2016) of *fivethirtyeight.com*, but nobody puts Trump's chances of winning at greater than 35%.

At 9:00 a.m., I log on to PEC and read Dr. Wang's final estimates, Clinton 323 Electoral votes and a 2.1 popular vote margin. Of course, as a qualitative researcher, I retain

a measure of skepticism about polling and punditry, but I have come to trust Wang more than the others.

While playing up the horse race, the media have been projecting near certainty of a Clinton win. This despite the fact that over the last two weeks, the polls have inched gradually toward Trump. As for Clinton herself, she seems to have drawn down her campaign, holding only a big "celebrity rally" in Philadelphia with Barack and Michelle Obama, and Bruce Springsteen on the evening before the election. Some critics think Hillary's campaign has been acting too complacent (Brownstein, 2016). While Hillary appears to be running out the clock, Trump is carrying out a full-court press in the battleground states of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. That may explain the uneasy feeling rumbling through my gut. *But Sam Wang made Hillary's odds 99%, I remind myself. He's a neuroscientist and an esteemed statistician. No way is he going to risk the humiliation of eating a bug on live television.*

I spend the morning surfing channels for news reports about voter turnout. A large turnout would likely diminish Trump's chances. On CBS News (2016), I hear,

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Across the country, Election Day is in full swing, and while it seems to be going smoothly overall, it hasn't been without problems. As millions of voters head to the polls to cast their ballots for president, their representatives in Congress, and other elected officials, long lines, issues with machines, and delayed openings of polling places have been reported in a number of locations.

*Predictable stuff, I tell myself. Ignore the network drama; their hype keeps viewers watching, delivering us to advertisers. I'm not going to get any relevant data until CNN releases exit polls at 5:00 p.m.* As Carolyn and I will be leaving for the National Communication Association (NCA) Convention in Philadelphia about that time, I decide to spend the afternoon reviewing the papers I will be presenting at the convention, catching up on e-mail, and packing for our trip. Over lunch, Carolyn reminds me that we need to leave for the airport around 5:00 p.m. *Damn, I'll likely miss the exit polls anyway.*

### **Election Day, 5:00 p.m. Eastern**

"Art, please turn off the T.V. and carry our suitcases out to the curb," Carolyn calls to me from the kitchen. "Our Uber is only four minutes away. You can get election reports on your cell phone."

I comply and hustle down the driveway. As we head out in the Uber, I Google "early exit polls." Clicking on the first item, a *Target Smart/William & Mary* (2016) poll, I learn that more than a quarter of Republicans who had voted prior to Election Day in Florida had crossed party lines, casting their ballots for Hillary Clinton. *Good news. Without Florida, Trump is unlikely to win. Oh how I would love to see this carnival end early.*

My spirits elevated, I click on a *Morning Consult/Politico Exit Poll* (2016), a survey of early and Election Day voters. I read, "Asked what characteristic is most important for the next president, 36 percent of voters say they want 'a strong leader.'" My heart sinks into my chest. Reading on, I learn that the percentage of actual voters who say they want "a strong leader"—a characterization Donald Trump's team made central to his campaign—is twice the percentage who said they were looking for a strong leader in the 2012 Presidential Election exit poll.

I turn toward Carolyn and whisper, "Hillary may be in trouble. One of the first exit polls indicates that a high percentage of the electorate were voting for a strong leader. That's Trump's argument." Carolyn frowns but does not say anything. "This could be a long night," I add.

We check our baggage and continue on to our gate. Our plane won't load passengers for another hour, so we park ourselves on high stools at the open bar that sits in the middle of the airside corridor. After Carolyn orders Stella drafts for us, she takes off her jacket and conspicuously displays her "Nasty Woman" t-shirt.

We strain to hear the low volume on the TV, which is tuned to CNN. At a few minutes after 7 p.m., early results start coming in from Georgia and Florida.

"It's too early to make a call in either state," Wolf Blitzer announces. "But early returns suggest that Georgia could be up for grabs." "That's good news," I say to Carolyn. "Wouldn't that be something if Hillary won Georgia?"

"Sure would," Carolyn nods in agreement.

We nurse our beers and glance periodically at the TV, which we can no longer hear, because many more passengers have now congregated around the bar. We pass the time on *Facebook* until we hear the announcement that it is time to board the plane. Gathering our belongings, we rise to leave for the gate. As we do, the man who had been sitting next to me approaches Carolyn. "Nice shirt you've got there," he chuckles, indicating his approval. Carolyn smiles and says, "Thanks," but does not engage him in conversation.

As we pass a TV in the boarding area, I hear Wolf Blitzer say, "Trump has taken a narrow lead in Florida and in Virginia."

"I think we should pay for Wi-Fi on the plane," I urge Carolyn. "Otherwise, we won't know anything until we land."

Carolyn gives me a knowing glance. Realizing that the suspense will be too much for us if we must wait until the plane lands, she replies, "Absolutely, but just for one phone. We can pass my cell phone back and forth."

Twenty minutes later, at 7:45 p.m., we are in the air on our way to Philadelphia. Carolyn purchases Wi-Fi and hands me her phone. Logging on to *Huffington Post's* election results, I discover that Trump has a narrow lead in Florida, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, though none of these states have been called by the networks. I hand the phone back to Carolyn. "Not good news. Trump is ahead in quite a few states he was predicted to lose. I'm getting worried."

At 9:50 p.m., we start our descent into Philadelphia. I check the phone one last time. More bad news. *The Associated Press* has declared Trump the winner of Ohio. Florida has not yet been called, but with 95 percent of the precincts counted, Trump has a lead of more than 175,000 votes, and he continues to lead in Virginia, New Hampshire, and North Carolina.

"There is nothing to feel good about here. The momentum is moving in the wrong direction. Trump is even ahead in Virginia," I say, passing the phone back to Carolyn.

"Virginia!" Carolyn exclaims. "How is that possible? Hillary was supposed to win Virginia easily." We sit silently, closing our eyes and squeezing hands as the plane lands on the runway.

### **Election Evening, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 10:15 p.m.**

When we step into the terminal in Philadelphia, I glance at the TV monitor.

“Breaking News: The Associated Press has called Florida for Donald Trump.”

*Oh no!*

Dazed by the news, Carolyn and I stand in a state of shock at the baggage claim carousel. We collect our luggage, exit the airport, and grab a cab to the Marriot Hotel. Our African American cab driver has the radio tuned to election results. “Quite a surprise,” I say to him. “It’s a disaster,” he replies, and then we all sit quietly as if stunned by the turn of events.

Entering the hotel, I glance at a monitor in the lobby and hear Dana Bash state, “I can’t really say anything is going well for Hillary Clinton right now. Trump is leading in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.”

An eerie quiet fills the lobby, creating a feeling of gloom and doom. From the registration area, I have a bird’s eye view of the bar in the center of the lobby. Surveying the scene, I notice the grim looks on the faces of the people huddled around the TV monitors. I recognize many of the faces in the crowd. They, like me, expected to celebrate and feel the exuberance of a big victory. Instead, we find ourselves in a state of alarm bordering on panic.

I have never witnessed anything like this in a convention lobby bar. There is no cacophony of loud voices and clicking glasses, only subdued murmuring. Some of the patrons look horrified; others merely puzzled. They can’t believe this is happening.

We complete our registration and head toward the elevator. As we glide past the perimeter of the bar, I notice Brenda Allen, an African American scholar I have known for more than thirty years. Rushing over to talk with me, she hugs me tightly and whispers, “It’s not over, there’s still a chance.” *She needs to believe*, I think, but I do not speak. What is there to say?

*I can’t stay here. I feel as if I’m witnessing an execution.*

“Let’s go to our room,” I plead to Carolyn, who is sharing a long hug with another colleague.

On the elevator, I fantasize that I am immersed in a dream. *Can I wake up now, please?*

When we enter our room, Carolyn immediately turns on the TV. We unpack quickly, and I get ready to go to sleep. Seeking a place to hide, I pull the covers over my head. Before I can fall asleep, however, the phone rings. Carolyn answers and tells me that our dear friend, Tony Adams, is on his way up to our room.

When Tony arrives, I sit up in bed. We hug, but hardly speak. Then we sit and stare at the screen in hypnotic astonishment. We look in on Clinton Headquarters, where women and men alike are weeping. Instead of an election night party, they are holding a vigil. The reporter observes that what is happening tonight prompts memories of “Dewey Defeats Truman.” *Sorry, but I’m not in the mood to debate*

*which election upset will be remembered as the most shocking. This one is sufficiently shattering to demoralize and frighten me.*

Shortly after midnight, Tony rises to leave. We stand together in silence for a few seconds, and then each of us hugs Tony tightly, allowing our squeeze to say what words could not. After Tony departs, Carolyn continues to watch TV, but I’ve seen and heard enough. Nothing is going to change the outcome; I can’t stomach any more of this.

I pull the covers over my head again and scoot into a cocoon. I feel exhausted, but my mind is racing and I can hear the pounding of my heart.

*How did this happen?* America has elected a hollow and vain man for president who has openly boasted about assaulting women, a man who wants to wall America off from the rest of the world and deport immigrants, a man whose life was aptly characterized by Mark Singer (2011) as “an existence unmolested by the rumbling of a soul.” Endorsed by champions of xenophobia and racism, Donald Trump, bullshit artist and conman, is now the president-elect of the United States.

What have we done?

I toss and turn throughout the night, trying not to wake Carolyn. Anxiety rolls through me. *I need to get a grip.* When I take some deep breathes, tears form and drip down my cheeks. I recognize the feeling in my gut. It feels similar to the existential angst I felt the morning my secretary informed me that my father had passed away. Helpless, confused, immobile, scared, angry—an amalgamation of the feelings of disbelief associated with deep grief.

*Pull yourself together, Art. You have to shake this off.*

## Wednesday, November 9, 2016

I wake up thinking about the election riff sponsored by the Emeritus Section of NCA at which I am scheduled to participate tomorrow. I had anticipated that the riff would be a humorous improvisational performance celebrating Hillary’s victory. Now I imagine it an interment. All I’ve been told in advance is that several retired performance studies scholars will do a thirty-minute adaptation of “School for Scandal,” revealing the Machiavellian dynamics of the art of spreading scandals, malicious gossip, and targeted slander. *Timely*, I think, *in light of more than twenty-five years of Republican tittle-tattle attacks on Hillary Clinton, her e-mail server being the latest shameful target.*

I have no idea what I can or should contribute, but the session itself has suddenly become much more important to me.

Shifting into research mode, I unplug my phone and go online to read how *The New York Times*, *New Yorker Magazine*, and other publications are responding to Donald

Trump's shocking election victory. David Remnick (2016) calls it "a crushing blow to the spirit . . . the electorate plurality's unimaginable decision to live in Trump's world of vanity, hate, arrogance, untruth, and recklessness," and Jenavieve Hatch (2016) cautions that "[i]f Trump's presidency looks anything like his campaign, to worry about our safety is not an overreaction—it's a natural response."

Rabbi Josh Feigelson (2016) publishes a grief-stricken letter to his children in which he says,

Last night and this morning, I find myself crying a different kind of tears. It feels like everything that I felt that night eight years ago when Barack Obama was elected has been inverted, turned upside down and inside out. We have lived through another moment in history, another moment I never thought would happen in my lifetime: America elected Ahashverosh as President. This morning I am so deeply fearful for America, for the world, for the Jewish people, for all of us, for you my children.

Charles Blow (2016) acknowledges how "hard [it is] to know specifically how to position yourself in a country that can elect a man with such staggering ineptitude and open animus. It makes you doubt whatever faith you had in the country itself," and Neil Gabler (2016) clarifies the transition that has occurred:

That whatever place we now live in is not the same place it was on November 7. No matter how the rest of the world looked at us on November 7, they will now look at us differently . . . and we are lost for it . . . Who knew that so many tens of millions of white men felt so emasculated by women and challenged by minorities? Who knew that after years of seeming progress on race and gender, tens of millions of white Americans lived in seething resentment, waiting for a demagogue to arrive who would legitimize their worst selves and channel them into political power . . . We are not living for ourselves anymore in this country. Now we are living for history.

Even Republican David Brooks (2016) calls the election of Donald Trump "a sociological revolution, a moral warning, and a political summons . . . We have now learned that millions of Americans are incapable of being morally offended or of putting virtue above partisanship."

I realize that my dissonance animates a desire to seek social support, but none of these commentaries makes me feel any better. If anything, they heighten my anxiety. All I can try to do is muddle through the day. Fight or flight? Neither seems appropriate. A friend of mine comes to mind, a woman who has experienced unimaginable tragedy and grief in her life. She recommends floating (J. Ketcham, personal communication, 2017, May 14). You lean into the grief, accepting the reality of what you are facing. There will likely be a time soon to work toward change and reform, but at this moment, there's a lot of pain and hurt that needs healing. For now, it feels as if all I can do is muddle through the day.

On Facebook, I post: *It's Midnight in America!*

I close my phone, check my schedule, then shower and dress quickly. Carolyn and I meet Tony for a quick courtesy continental breakfast in the hotel. Bookended by TV monitors, the long narrow room is crowded. I recognize a few NCA members, but most of the people in the room are strangers. I keep my head down, staying out of eye contact to avoid conversation. When I look up, I see Carolyn's tear-filled eyes. "I just received an e-mail from our dog-sitter," she says in a quiet voice. "The dogs are fine but she's not. She called in sick to work because she can't stand the thought of being out in public today. She's still in a state of shock."

"So am I. I can't bear the thought of having to make casual conversation. Let's get out of here."

We grab our raincoats, shuffle out of the room, and swiftly depart the hotel, walking several blocks to the garage where Tony parked his rental car. We spend the morning driving in a light rain through old neighborhoods I had lived in during my ten years on the faculty at Temple University. On the way to a Jewish deli for lunch, the car radio informs us that Hillary Clinton is about to speak. "Let's pull off the road and listen," I urge.

"I'm sorry," Hillary begins, and I hear Carolyn begin to cry in the back seat. Hillary's speech is bereft of bitterness, her demeanor composed as she urges her supporters to continue to fight for what they believe in. "And to all the little girls who are watching this," she says, implicitly connecting her own life story to their futures, "never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world to pursue and to achieve your own dreams" (Clinton, 2016). The three of us sniffle and sob through Hillary's pauses, identifying with her pain and allowing ourselves to feel our own.

As we head back to Center City, I suddenly feel as if my stomach is going to explode. "Would you pull over at that construction site over there?" I ask Tony. "I feel sick to my stomach. I suppose it's the pent up grief circulating through my body."

As soon as I get out of the car, the wind begins to pick up and a downpour pelts against my face. By the time I return to the car, a thick and damp, misty fog had set in, providing a gloomy landscape that seemed to be enveloping the whole city. It is now rush hour, and the inclement weather has slowed traffic to a virtual standstill. Bumper-to-bumper, we crawl toward Center City as darkness encircles us. I feel no urgency to get anywhere; I don't know what I'll say to the many anguished friends back at the hotel who are experiencing various states of bewilderment over how this could have happened. How are any of us going to face the menacing and uncharted territory of a Donald Trump presidency? What comes next for America and the world?

About an hour later, Tony drops Carolyn and me off at the Marriot. Entering at a side entrance, we observe enclaves

of convention participants engaged in a form of communal mourning. Tears flow freely as people hug each other tightly, though they exchange few words. I greet old friends with some apprehension and self-consciousness. Initially, I worry about how to express how happy I am to see them and, at the same time, convey the despair and pessimism so many of us are feeling. It had not occurred to me that the environment of an academic convention might be precisely the kind of safe space we needed to cool down our anxiety and fear. We abandon ordinary convention greeting rituals in favor of long, firm hugs.

### Thursday, November 10, 2016

Shortly after I awake, I retrieve the e-mail message from Patti Gillespie (2016) inviting me to participate in the election riff session. "It will require no preparation before you get to the convention," Patti writes. She tells me that the goal is "to expose the Pinocchio phenomenon of the recent election cycle. We anticipate that you will riff on this humorous performance to explain the results of the election."

*Hard for me to find humor in this scandalous election cycle, I think. No preparation, well she got that right.*

I gather some notes I made the previous day and head for the session. The performers present recomposed excerpts from *School for Scandal* (Sheridan, 1989) in a traditional "reader's theatre" format. Against all odds, they do manage to squeeze out some laughs, but this audience did not come here to laugh about the shameful treatment of Hillary Clinton by the Trump campaign. They want an explanation or two; they want to understand how this happened; they want to know whether their worst fears are justified, what they can expect going forward, whether there's any hope. What can we do now?

When my turn comes, I pause, scan the room from side to side, and then begin.<sup>1</sup> "I am the son of a Jewish immigrant father who loved America. He was a sign painter who worked with his hands, lettering storefronts, billboards, and tractor-trailers. As an urban, White working-class man, he also was a life-long Democrat. 'Republicans don't care about people like me,' he often said. 'It was Roosevelt who made it possible for us to have a decent standard of living.' If my father were alive today, he would be reacting with the kind of 'revulsion and profound anxiety' that David Remnick (2016) expressed in *The New Yorker* yesterday.

"I know that there are numerous Americans who are not experiencing the disgust that many of us in this room are feeling today. We need to understand them, and they need to understand us, if we are ever to reach the point of being a nation of citizens who feel as if we are all in it together, one indivisible nation.

"I acknowledge that there is a lot I need to learn about Trump voters. Still, as a person who lives a third of each

year in rural America, I do know a few things about the rural White working class who likely voted for Trump. Many of them suffer from a deep sense of insignificance. They are looking for an alternative to, or a solution for, the desperation they feel because the lives they are living, especially, their working lives, increasingly deprive them of feelings of worth, dignity, and hope.

"Despite all of his character flaws and lack of qualifications, Donald Trump is actually an ideal transference object for people suffering such extreme vulnerability. He is the kind of man they can deify and place on a pedestal, a person to whom they can attribute extraordinary powers. The more of these powers he possesses, the more Trump's supporters believe that some of his strengths can rub off on them (Becker, 1973). In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker depicted the essence of transference as a 'taming of terror' (p. 145). In the face of the chaos they feel, many of these people can do little more than endow a certain person with the power to control, order, and combat the sources of their fear, pain, and suffering. By providing them a kind of 'heroic self-validation' (Becker, 1973, p. 157), Donald Trump became this person for many rural White working-class voters.

"But Donald Trump is also a highly divisive figure. That's why so many of us in this room are frightened and horrified by his dystopian image of America. I know I am. When Trump looks at our country, he sees only industrial decay and collapsing inner cities. When he looks across the oceans, he sees mainly rivals and competitors, and shows no respect for American alliances, collaborations, or partnerships. During the campaign, he insulted a decorated war veteran and the gold-star mom of a slain U.S. soldier, boasted about sexually harassing women, mocked disabled people, and showed a lack of preparation for debates on policy. If this were an audition, he would not have received a call back. As a dress rehearsal for the highest office in the land, the campaign he ran showed that he did not possess the character, preparation, or credentials of a president.

"Of course, this assessment assumes that a President Trump would want to follow some modicum of historical precedent regarding how presidents comport themselves—what it means to be presidential. But that was neither the ground on which he campaigned nor the essence of his appeal to rural White working-class people. They voted for what they perceived to be a strong and fractious leader, someone who would batter, blow up, and maul the system. Indeed, Michael Moore (2016) referred to Donald Trump as 'the rustbelt's Molotov cocktail . . . I think they love the idea of blowing up the system,' he said.

"We can't know at this point what kind of country will rise from the ashes of a Donald Trump presidency. Today, the people who voted to blow up the system feel elated, while the rest of us are demoralized. How long will this feel-good victory last? The apparent victors are the same

people who live in the parts of rural America that have the highest rates of backbreaking poverty, the fewest college graduates, the highest rates of teen pregnancy, the highest percentage of unemployed males over the age of 16, and rampant opioid drug addiction (Adamy & Overberg, 2017).

“The exit polls reported thus far show that these people turned out enthusiastically for Donald Trump. Were these people voting against their own interests? Many commentators think so, but I’m not so sure. Certainly, Trump voters have economic interests, but they also identify as resolutely anti-abortion, pro-gun rights, and more fundamentally religious than the population at large (Khazan, 2016, November 9). Diversity frightens and/or annoys these people. Many of them believe that foreign-born workers have stolen their jobs and depressed their income. ‘Make America Great Again’ resonates with White people who live in places in which they no longer feel secure about the future and can still recall a time when their White identity offered them a secure and respectable status. They blame their acutely painful loss of status on social change, including what they see as ‘political correctness’ and an ‘identity politics’ that they believe has raised the status of other groups—Blacks, women, gays and lesbians, etc.—at their expense (see Taub, 2017).

“Nevertheless, I believe Trump voters are similar to the rest of us in the one important respect to which I alluded earlier. They need to feel secure in their self-esteem (Adler, 1924), to be able to justify themselves as beings of primary value and usefulness, and as deserving of respect. You may recall that one of the turning points in the 2012 election was the release of the video in which Mitt Romney used the term ‘takers’ to refer to the 47% of Americans who (in his estimation) are dependent on government and act like victims. In this election, Hillary Clinton used the phrase ‘basket of deplorables’ to insinuate that Trump supporters were racist, sexist, homophobic, and/or xenophobic. Romney called the takers ‘irresponsible,’ while Clinton labeled the deplorables ‘irredeemable’.

“It was a mistake for Hillary Clinton to write off a large segment of the voting public, treating them as if they were indecent and undeserving of any respect at all. These people want their pain, rage, and fear acknowledged and legitimated. They already feel ashamed of not making it in the American economy. To further shame them as ‘irredeemably deplorable’ only intensified their feelings of being misunderstood, disenfranchised, and invalidated by elite intellectuals, career politicians, and radical activists, thus intensifying the divide they perceive between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

“On the other hand, Donald Trump championed their causes. He said aloud the things many of them felt and believed, and he spoke for them with intensity, aggression, anger, and no shame whatsoever. Moreover, as Lakoff (2016) observed, Trump only asked them for their support and their vote. They didn’t need to express their own politically

incorrect views openly; he would do that for them. He might even make their views respectable (Lensmire, 2017).

“Is it any wonder, then, that Donald Trump would seem heroic to these people? Many of them had never gotten this close to a billionaire. All Donald Trump had to do was play the part of the blue-collar billionaire by pretending to feel their pain, understand their plight, and channel their rage and suffering, which has been ignored for so long by Washington politicians. *How* he was going to alter the reality of their suffering didn’t matter all that much at the time, because when they left a Donald Trump rally they felt a sense (at least momentarily) of what Becker (1973) called ‘cosmic specialness’ and ‘unshakeable meaning.’ For a change, they had warm feelings about themselves. Someone, and not just anyone but a famous someone, was listening and paying attention to them, giving them a sense of self-respect.

“Of course, Donald Trump is not really a populist. He was just playing the part. Early on during the primaries, he emphasized the enthusiasm gap between Republican and Democratic voters, and his dominance of the airwaves and attractiveness to the Republican base intensified and expanded this enthusiasm gap. As the dust begins to settle on the exit polls that is what we are finding, white voters without college degrees and white evangelicals helping Trump run up the huge margins he needed, while women and non-White voters failed to deliver for Hillary Clinton (‘Exit Polls,’ 2016).

“Trump worked the con to perfection. He knew how to take advantage of people who were having trouble dealing with the truth of their existence. Posing as a non-politician, he offered them hope in the form of an illusory protection against the reality of their lives. He presented them with lies about their lives that they desperately wanted to believe. Showing complete indifference to the truth of what the lives of White working-class people really are like, Trump gave them, more than anything else, an impression of himself as ‘the one’ who could fix their lives. Trading on their own illusions about themselves, he reinforced their belief that the better days of their ‘old lives’ could be retrieved by a renaissance in manufacturing, expansion of the fossil fuel industry, deportation of immigrants, a ban on Muslims entering the U.S., repeal of Obama-care, and gutting global trade.

“All of this begs the question, what do we do now? There is no way I can find to look at Donald Trump’s life, his biography, and his conduct during the campaign and come to any conclusion other than that he will be a catastrophe as president. My biggest concern is trust. I don’t trust Trump to speak truthfully. He has never shown a willingness to acknowledge and face up to disturbing facts about himself. Lacking confidence in his commitment to truth, having observed his vilification of American institutions—the ways he reviles the press and maligns the courts—and his thin-skinned and easily provoked nature, I find myself

agreeing with those commentators and communities who are bracing for violence, racism, and incivility.

“I think the best one can hope for is that the deep and fractious divides in which our country is immersed can somehow be used to promote a broad and concentrated moral conversation about the quest for the good we seek in American life, and the value and importance of truth in finding it. My hope is that we will find the courage to converse openly about the virtues necessary for seeking a good life for the widest cross sections of our population. In this fashion, we would commit together to figuring out ‘what are the better and what are the worse ways of living in and through’ difficult situations like the one Donald Trump’s presidency is certain to evoke (MacIntyre, 1984).

### July 3, 2017

Today, more than six months later, intense anxiety continues to hang over and roll through me. I worry about the existential threat to our planet posed by rising sea levels as the Trump Administration announces their intention to withdraw America from the Paris climate accord in defiance of global cooperation. I feel nervous about Trump’s desire to expand and modernize our nuclear arsenal in preparation for the kind of a war in which there would be no such thing as winning, and his administration’s apparent resistance to diplomacy. I am sickened by the savage domestic policies being proposed by the far right wing of the Republican establishment who seem doggedly determined to rob millions of people of their health care and push defenseless and vulnerable people out of nursing homes, using the tax “savings” to line the pockets of the wealthiest people in the country. And I fret about the reluctance of the Congress to take any significant action in response to Russian interference in the 2016 election, to call out Trump’s lies, and to speak forcefully in defense of the press and the courts, institutions that are increasingly being subjected to attacks by the Trump administration.

In a few short months (that feel like an eternity), President Trump has managed to debase the American presidency, erode the trust of our allies and global partners, contaminate our political discourse, weaken our standing in the world, and diminish public trust in truth. Trump is not only a liar (Leonhardt & Thompson, 2017), he is also a bull-shitter, which can be worse because a bull-shitter “does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out or makes them up, to suit his purposes” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 56). Trump concocts fictions and fantasies that distract us. His tweets often control the news cycle, framing the political discourse of the day and occupying our consciousness. He is very good at this. It comes naturally to him. We can argue about whether he is lying or bull shitting, but there can be little doubt that his intention is to weaken the public’s grasp of reality.

In an effort to heal my own psyche, I volunteered to teach an undergraduate course for the Honors College at University of South Florida (USF) in the spring semester. I titled the course, “Authenticity, Vulnerability, and Truth.” During the presidential campaign, political commentators and pundits kept explaining Trump’s appeal to the White working class as a function of his “authenticity.” I was puzzled and frustrated by how they were using the term *authenticity*. Trump was considered authentic to these observers because “he speaks his mind,” because “he uses plain speech,” because “he is unscripted,” because he “acts natural” and because “he doesn’t think before he speaks.” In other words, Trump came across as a rugged individualist who is not afraid to tell it like it is.

I wanted the students in this class to examine how the meanings of the term *authenticity* have changed over the course of time from the classical period to the present and to question whether authenticity should be applied more rigorously than it had been in the presidential campaign. In the course, we read Guignon’s (2004) *On Being Authentic*, Tolstoy’s (1981) *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Frankl’s (2006) *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Buber’s (1996) *I and Thou*, and Slater’s (2001) *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. I asked the students to think critically about the meaning of authenticity by examining the communal nature of human being, the character and depth of one’s own self-understanding, the importance of networks of shared social practices and cultural heritage, and the larger drama of shared cultural history. Toward the end of the class, I came back to Trump and raised the question of responsibility. I asked the class whether they now believed it appropriate to apply the term *authentic* to the character of a person who fails to stand behind his life story, for good or for bad. “Doesn’t a person need to stand behind his actions, own them, and own up to them?” I asked. As a case in point, we examined how Trump handled his acknowledgment of the birther controversy and the Access Hollywood tape.

### Moving On

A few weeks after my course ended, I watched a segment of *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* in which the historian Timothy Snyder (2017a) compared the current momentum of the Trump Administration to tyrannical and fascist regimes (Snyder, 2017b). “If you want to rip the heart out of a democracy, you go after facts,” Snyder cautioned. “If we don’t have facts, then we can’t trust each other; if we don’t trust each other, then we don’t have laws; and if we don’t have laws, then there is no democracy.”

President Trump is following this protocol to a tee:

First, he lies about everything all the time; second, he says that it’s his opponents and the journalists that lie. He is now working on the third and most difficult step where everyone looks

around and says “What is truth anyway? There isn’t any.” Once this is in place, then resistance is frozen and the game is over. (Snyder, 2017b)

I grieve the loss of a respect for truth and a shared belief in a stubbornly independent reality. My sadness stems from our president’s failure to recognize that there are facts and truths over which he cannot help to exercise direct or immediate control. In *On Truth*, the philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2006) observes, “It is what we do with the truth that counts,” but he also warns “without truth, we are out of luck before we start” (p. 36).

“How can we fail to care about the truth,” asks Frankfurt? “We can’t” (p. 101).

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### Note

1. At the postelection session, I talked from notes, outlining many of the issues presented in this section. In preparing this manuscript, I expanded and developed these ideas in greater detail and added the analysis of heroic self-validation associated with transference so keenly developed by Ernest Becker (1973). In many of my previous publications, I have applied Becker’s recasting of psychoanalytic, philosophical, and religious thinking to various aspects of the human condition and human communication. Of course, I had access to many more perspectives on the election (and more opportunity to process my own) during the time I was preparing this manuscript. Thus, my representation of the remarks I gave at the riff is aimed at a narrative rather than an historical truth (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

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