WHAT CAN I SAY?

IN SEARCH OF STARTING POINTS AND NEW WORDS

Ethan Casey

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What Can I Say?
In Search of Starting Points and New Words

I woke up early on Wednesday morning, November 9, wondering quite literally, in at least two senses, what I could say. First of all, what would I be permitted to say or write under President Trump? Of course I worried about freedom of speech in a political sense. But I also wondered what I would be capable of saying, to whom, and to what ends? Why bother? And anyway, what remained relevant anymore, and what might have been abruptly and perhaps even permanently rendered obsolete?

I had finally gotten to sleep at 3:00 a.m. in my hotel room in Fort Worth, Texas, after learning that Hillary Clinton had telephoned Donald Trump to concede the election, then forcing myself to watch his victory speech. I had set my alarm for 7:30 because I had to be in front of a class at 9:00, but I woke up unaided and fully alert before 6:00 and immediately made a cup of coffee and headed straight to my notebook. I had to take it as encouraging that I had awoken after just three hours' sleep feeling the strong urge and need to write something. "I'll show them – I'll write an essay!" Grim joking aside, that at least proved that I was not yet unfree or without hope.

This was a starting point: to refuse to be paralyzed and demoralized. Each of us has at least that power. One thing I knew, as I sat down at the hotel room desk to do what I do, was that there was still, and always, work to do. And, as the author of Ecclesiastes knew many revolutions ago, that is a good thing: "There is nothing

better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour." I had to consider myself fortunately situated: I had work to do that was gainful, meaningful, and mine to do. Much of it was right where I was at this moment, at a university deep in the heart of incurably conservative white Texas, with generally thoughtful students and faculty with whom I could – and must – continue seeking grounds for common interest and purpose. A secondary blessing was that most of my pending projects were on subjects that very much still mattered on November 9, without reference to who was or would become President of the United States.

But meanwhile, all over the Internet, predictable analyses, postmortems, and recriminations were predictably already being written. Many of them were excellent. But how many would I have the stomach to read? Long essays were sure to be penned soon by the erudite denizens of *The New York Review of Books*. So what? The chattering classes were sure to go right on chattering. And they likely would be left free to go on chattering, largely because so few were listening to them anyway. I had to hope that I would be left free in the same way, for the same reason.

My father, my lodestar, grew up not quite poor in Dallas, Texas. As a teenager or college student sometime in the 1950s, "right during the Martin Luther King time," he got a letter published in the *Dallas Morning News* wondering aloud how the civic poobahs planned to achieve their ambition of making Dallas a "world city," when it was still a segregated city. He jumped on the Kennedy bandwagon and admired the tough Texan, Lyndon Johnson, who rammed the Voting Rights Act through the U.S. Congress.

He canvassed for Eugene McCarthy in 1968 because he agreed with McCarthy that the Vietnam War was damaging, unjustified, and stupid. On November 11, 2016, my father wrote to me:

> Waking up the day after the election I felt like an alien in a strange land. What I sensed viscerally was what I imagined might be a small part of what Muslims and undocumented immigrants must feel every day — a deep insecurity about what tomorrow holds for them (and for me). I simply don't recognize my own country any more, and I have a copy of my Dallas County birth certificate.
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> While my initial concern was (and remains) the insecurity and instability of the country in the months and years ahead, my equally great concern is that I simply feel great shame and embarrassment that we as a nation have knowingly embraced an unstable boorish and racist know-nothing (who is accused of sexual assault and fraud and of not even paying his own bills), not only as head of government (and therefore as head of the Justice Department and as commander-in-chief of the armed forces), but also as head of state. I'm ashamed and embarrassed that this is the family portrait we have chosen to present before the world.

At age 79, my father was having to begin living among the ruins of the America he believed he had signed up for, amid the renewed ascendancy of the most toxic aspects of the America into which he had been born. He lived now, in Colorado Springs, in fear for the survival of some of his own long-cherished local friendships.

Even as it left my father stunned and isolated, the election brutally drove a stake through the heart of Hillary Clinton's undead political career. Which was just as well, to be frank. It was reputedly

John McCain who said that "the only cure for presidential ambition is embalming fluid." But Hillary's ambition surely now had been rendered definitively futile, and she would henceforth be fated to nurse it in the wilderness and in private. She emerged the next day to take her best stab at providing statespersonship. It wasn't a very good stab. "We have seen that our nation is more deeply divided than we thought," she said, "but I still believe in America, and if you do, then we must accept the result. We owe him an open mind and the chance to lead." No, actually, we mustn't and we don't. See my father, above. What Hillary was saying was not that she believed in America per se, but that she believed in the now erstwhile American political system. Of course she believed in it, being thoroughly its creature. On it she had staked the career that clearly meant everything to her.

But, although Hillary and many others were not yet ready to admit it, the Trump victory meant that the system was in fact now erstwhile, no longer relevant. If the system could result in the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, then – the will of the people and the wisdom of the Founders both notwithstanding – the system was broken. This was not really about Trump. Somehow, we would have to grope and stumble our way toward some new system. In the meantime, what Hillary Clinton failed to understand was that the American political system, however we practice or define it, is not the same thing as America. On this bitter morning after, she no longer possessed any moral authority or political credibility. I could understand and respect President Obama's need and compulsion to play it by the book, with the bland and calming things he said in the aftermath. I could understand too that Hillary played it by the book, because that was what she had always done. But in her case I couldn't respect it. *You failed us,* was my only thought. *You have no right to tell us what we must do now.*

Way back when the story of Hillary's email server first broke, in March 2015, I had predicted that it would end up dealing the death blow to her candidacy. My exact words at the time, in an email to my family, were "dead in the water." Usually I enjoy being proven right, but not this time. Even notwithstanding the email thing – and the email thing was anything but notwithstanding, even if only as an unforgivably arrogant political blunder – there was no way forward from this debacle unless we admitted that Hillary had been a horrible candidate. Her "love and kindness" slogan was a lame echo of the original George Bush's patently insincere pitch in 1992, the year he lost to Bill Clinton, for "a kinder, gentler nation." She had shamelessly touted the gender card, up to and including the tawdry gambit of putting her own two-year-old granddaughter to political use, claiming a desire to build "an America where a father can tell his daughter, 'Yes, you can be anything you want to be. Even President of the United States.'" Above all, she had foisted herself on the country as not the best option but the only one, stiff-arming Bernie Sanders and his constituency (which included me), and then offering no better pitch than that she was Hillary Clinton (thus entitled), a woman (thus due), and not Donald Trump ("Vote for me, or else").

To widespread astonishment it turned out that, at least until further notice, the political reality was the polar opposite of what many of us had spent 2016 wishfully supposing: it was not the Republican Party that Trump had destroyed, but the Democratic Party. What had just happened nationally was an amplified echo of what had occurred half a decade earlier in Wisconsin, where I grew up. If you're not familiar with what happened in Wisconsin, read up on it (and watch the documentary film *We Are Wisconsin*). Wisconsin was now revealing itself yet again as a bellwether and harbinger: deep and chronic alienation between white and

minority communities; bitter division within the previously "nice" and apolitical suburban and small-town middle class; a Republican Party led by a ruthless megalomaniac; a Democratic establishment unwilling to channel grassroots aspirations and frustrations and offering nothing better than a previously defeated, milquetoast candidate with no message. Hillary Clinton was the national Tom Barrett of 2016. Tom who? Exactly.

So, is the battle for America's future now over? Have "they" won? They certainly would like us to think so. But the questions brought to the surface by the election go beyond the political to the existential. If I am not one of them – the people who just won – then who am I? On the other hand, if they and I are of the same community – I am, after all, white like them, 2016 having been the political year that left me feeling thoroughly and depressingly categorized – then what does that say about me? I'm not one of them! Or am I? (Echoes of Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!*) Who are they, as distinct from me and those like me? Where can I go to be away from them? Nowhere in America, apparently. Certainly not Wisconsin. Maybe somewhere like Cambridge, Massachusetts. Or Seattle. Well, I happen to live in Seattle, so that's something at least.

But as early as Election Night itself, it was clear that we cannot get away from them. We have met the enemy and he is us. I spent 45 minutes, starting just before 8 p.m. Central Time, on the phone with a friend in Michigan, commiserating and trading updates from the screens we were both watching. We did manage to laugh together, imagining her pompously left-wing ex-husband writing long, highly articulate Facebook posts about how we

should all have voted for Jill Stein. But then my friend thought of her neighbors, fellow white people she would see tomorrow or next week in the supermarket or on the sidewalk in her suburban town between Detroit and Ann Arbor. Probably most white people in America have friends, relatives, neighbors, and co-workers who voted for Trump. My friend and I were hearing the death knell of the apolitical politesse of middle-class America. I get the impression that non-white Americans have had a lot more practice at protecting themselves by knowing what to say and when, and what to leave unsaid. Those of us who are white are only beginning to acquire that skill set.

A friend in Fort Worth prevailed on me to go out for dinner Wednesday evening with him and his wife, who was taking the election result hard. She had taken a sick day from work, unwilling to face some of her co-workers. "We're growing weary of living in a red state," my friend confessed to me. At dinner his wife told me what she had said to try to comfort their two sensitive teenage children: "He can't change who we are as a family." The next day I told a Seattle activist friend that that seemed like a good thing to say. "For the kids, yes," he agreed. "But that's not a political strategy."

It occurred to me, over dinner with my Fort Worth friends, that all three of us were children of the great, nondescript white middle class of the broad middle swath of the continent: his family from small-town western Pennsylvania, hers from Nebraska, mine from Dallas by way of East Texas on one side and Kansas and Omaha on the other. I put to them that our cohort had been led down a garden path and left stranded. For generational reasons we had become college-educated and arguably somewhat worldly, but we now found ourselves stuck between those "uneducated whites" who this year had been discovered like some lost jungle tribe, and

the coastal and university-town elite whose caste markings were advanced degrees and cultural polish, and into which we three and others like us had been grudgingly invited as honorary second-class junior probationary members, so long as we did the expected polite things like voting for Democrats. My own grandmother, who gave me my moral compass, had been one of those now-totemic uneducated whites. She always had something to say. (On Reagan: "He *wudn't* a good actor, and he's *not* a good president.") I wonder what she would have said about this election. One thing I do know is how I would vote if I had to choose between Wanda Casey and Hillary Clinton.

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Now what? If, as I knew already on November 9, the fetal position is not an option, where do we go from here? I began seeking points of weakness in the monolith and found a few talking points to reiterate often and without apology. For starters, like Bush in 2000, Trump won the electoral vote but lost the popular vote. That can't be allowed to happen again. The Electoral College must be abolished. But, beyond the daunting matter of how that might even be achieved, there was the unasked question of what would become of separate states per se. How radically might the political geography of the country end up being rearranged, and would we really want that? Antiquated and distorting though the Electoral College is, it is (come to think of it) essential to the United States of America as we know it. For how can states be united with each other, unless they first exist and function severally? So, yes, we should insist on the abolition of the Electoral College – but gird ourselves for a cascade of unintended consequences.

As with the Electoral College, the Supreme Court situation is technically within the pale of legality, but actually the very stuff of dictatorship, and it must be named and shamed. Nor is this abuse and manipulation of technical legality a new trick. Hitler and Julius Caesar both came to power by such means. How legitimate am I required to consider those new Trump-appointed justices, given that the Republicans – not Trump himself, but the "mainstream" Republicans who already controlled Congress, before the election – had unabashedly and unprecedentedly denied even a hearing to Merrick Garland, the elected president's perfectly mainstream appointee? For it was not really Obama that they scorned and humiliated, but all of us millions of citizens who voted for him (or even who voted against him) on the understanding that appointing new Supreme Court justices was one of the things he was specifically empowered to do. The Republicans were rejecting not Obama, but American democracy itself.

They would call us sore losers for insisting on these points, but so be it.

On one level the problem certainly is Trump, and what further damage he might be able to do in cahoots with the Republicans. But the deeper problem is that not only is what we call the system broken, but the country itself is. One of the protests on the evening of November 10 was in Seattle, and it happened to coincide with a gang-related incident in which five people were shot at Third and Pike, a major downtown intersection. A few days later someone expressed concern to me about it, assuming the shootings had been part of the political protest. I knew they weren't, because I know Seattle and more specifically because at that same intersection my friend the musician and author Dennis Rea and I had witnessed a similar gun battle some months earlier, while cowering behind a bus kiosk. Both incidents were related to drugs and/or turf –

you know, just "normal" American big-city street violence. The incident Dennis and I witnessed had merited barely a paragraph in the dainty *Seattle Times*. But the coincidence of my own city's latest downtown shooting with one of the first post-election anti-Trump protests felt ominous.

The election resurrected for many of us in Seattle the dormant but long-cherished idea of Cascadia, a notional country comprising Oregon, Washington (which might have to be renamed), and British Columbia. I proposed now to Dennis something that I would call The Cascadia Movement, complete with website, thought-through talking points, and "Click here to join Cascadia and pledge that you live in Washington or Oregon." If it gained some traction online, who knew what might ensue? Dennis burst my bubble by reminding me that there existed a group of long standing called Cascadia Now. Then he argued that

> any realistic secession scenario would have to go beyond the old Cascadia conception to include California. I have a newfound appreciation for our oft-maligned neighbors to the south, who've floated Washington and Oregon all these years as bastions of progressivism; with their numbers, a viable new nation might be possible.
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> Of course the reds in the rest of the country would launch military action over the potential loss of their Pacific ports. Still, we can dream. The United States as currently constituted is no longer a viable polity.

Such dreams might be just that, but they were in the air. On November 15 the *Seattle Times* ran a short article about what it was calling Calexit, the idea that the entire West Coast might secede and, rather than forming a new country, join Canada. People Like Us wouldn't even have to move to Canada –

Canada would come to us! As an establishment organ, the *Seattle Times* had to present Calexit as something goofy and implausible, and it duly did so. But I read the article as starting from the apparently true premise that there really was a lot of chatter about the possibility. Where is the line between a possibility and a reality? Was Calexit or Cascadia real, or imaginary, or a bit of both? In any case my wife reminded me that, whereas she would be perfectly happy to join Canada, my demonstratively patriotic in-laws would not be, and a little domestic debate ensued about whether matters really had reached such a pass yet anyway. I expressed incredulity that any right-thinking person would even hesitate to join Canada in such circumstances. She stuck up for her parents for at least not having voted for Trump. Where is the proverbial tipping point? Are we always aware when we have crossed a Rubicon?

Then I got an email inviting me to sign the petition, started by Daniel Brezenoff of Long Beach, California, to try to persuade members of the Electoral College to become "faithless electors" by voting against the traditional, but apparently not completely obligatory, commitment to vote for whichever candidate won their state. Several unlikely things had to happen in order for such a project to reverse the election result, but I admired Brezenoff's nerve, and I saw potential in the political gesture of a large number of Americans going on record together in such a way.

So I signed the petition, and for about 24 hours I indulged in magical thinking, refreshing the web page often to watch the number creep upwards, at a rather impressive clip, toward the stated goal of 4.5 million. Between 6:30 a.m. Pacific Time on November 17 and the same time the next morning, the petition picked up about 50,000 signatories. My quick math told me that at that rate, by the time the Electoral College met on December 19, nearly 6 million – almost 2 percent of all Americans – would

have signed. But I awoke on the morning of November 18 to the realization that the situation had already raced well ahead of any such solution, tempting and even legitimate though it might be. Saying "Oops" and electing Hillary after all was not going to fix all that was broken.

And in any case politics does not have to be tantamount to civil war. Or does it? Maybe I needed to reread *The Prince* or *The Art of War*. On the other hand, perhaps the most subversive thing one could do would be to refuse to do battle. But that might not be possible for a person with a conscience. What I'm willing to fight for is nothing so high-minded as the vaunted proverbial "soul of America" – that's too abstract, and abstraction itself is part of the problem – but rather simply for an America that I want to live in. By now, we should be able and willing to behave like a grown-up pluralist nation. And I don't mean "pluralist" as a sneaky euphemism for claiming we must be ideologically progressive or even merely liberal (whatever those words really mean anyway). I mean it as a statement of demonstrable fact. Like it or not, we various and sundry Americans are in fact stuck here together, and we're going to have to deal with each other one way or another. If America is to survive and reconcile with itself, we must somehow make an honest moral and historical accounting of all the damage wrought since the tainted election of 2000 – merely for starters. Abraham Lincoln made this point in 1865, when he urged Americans to "strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds … [and] to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

How long a road has America traveled from Lincoln to Trump? And where does the road lead from here? The observation that we're stuck with each other might be a banal one, but America

really is at an unprecedented crossroads, and we're not going to get past it either by hurling terms of abuse and nationalist rhetoric at each other or by muttering about how we somehow survived all those past crises, so this time too everything will somehow turn out all right. "People don't eat in the long run," said Franklin Roosevelt's relief czar, Harry Hopkins. Yes, we did survive all our past crises, but only by definition, because we're here now at all. We're the ones who did survive. And that doesn't actually count for much, other than as a starting point.

We're the ones who have survived to this point, and we have to decide whether we want to continue surviving together, in peace, or whether it's acceptable for some of us to survive and others not to. "The apostle of anger now hopes that we rise above anger," wrote Leon Wieseltier in the *Washington Post.* "Having employed divisiveness as his primary instrument, the president-elect now implores us to put an end to our divisions. In the name of post-electoral comity, we are supposed to forget what we know. At this moment, therefore, it is important to affirm the reality, and the inevitability, and even the nobility, of some of our divisions." I agree with Wieseltier that unity and comity for their own sakes are not to be cherished at all costs. Still, there must be – there has to be – potential for these among those of us who are not public officials but ordinary people.

A recent experience offers me a starting point. A couple of weeks before the election, I spent six days in a mountain village in the part of Haiti most severely affected by Hurricane Matthew. Such a week, in such a place, is good for the soul in several ways. First and foremost, the human needs both immediate and chronic that one witnesses put other things in perspective. Second, and related, is that in rural Haiti one is offline both by circumstance and by choice, and the effect is spiritually cleansing.

When I returned to Port-au-Prince and wi-fi access, I discovered not only that in six days I had received literally no emails of any urgency or great significance, but also that no earth-shaking events had taken place in the United States or, for that matter, the world. We were just that many days closer to Election Day. It was a comforting reminder that the 24/7 news cycle could get by perfectly well for a week without my participation or attention.

Third, I was in Haiti supporting the work of three nurses from Wisconsin, and I knew that one of them was planning to vote for Trump. I didn't vote for Trump, and I wish nobody had ever been given the opportunity or felt the compulsion to do so. But the fact and the knowledge of our political differences, great as they were, made no difference whatsoever in our ability to work together effectively and meaningfully to serve extremely poor people suffering in the aftermath of a major natural disaster It sounds trite to say that, but it's less trite if you consider that neither the American two-party system nor the Trump victory represents a sacrosanct, unchangeable Way Things Are that must be allowed to govern who we are and what we're about as individuals and communities.

As this essay neared completion, its title came to seem pertinent in a third way. Ten long days down the road, what could I say that had not already been said, and well, by someone else? Russell Brand, Roger Cohen, Thomas Frank, Parag Khanna, Naomi Klein, John Oliver, Rebecca Solnit, Cornel West, Gary Younge, Rafia Zakaria, and many others were already saying and writing things I would have written or said if I had thought to and had their audiences.[1] And what's the point of a 5,000-word essay, anyway? The timely

op-ed, the quick take, the blog, the tweet, the text message, are the literary forms of our time. And how much of what I had written, or would write, was even original? Who out there would hear me, even if what I had to say was worth hearing? Why did I even feel a need to be heard?

Our attention and understanding are perpetually being overtaken by events, which is why we need the best writers to help us think. I couldn't help wondering what Tony Judt would have had to say about all that was going on now. Or Susan Sontag (who was tarred and feathered in September 2001 for suggesting that "A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen"). Or Albert Camus. At least those writers had written plenty while they were still alive to do so, and I had read them. In her essay collection *Create Dangerously* (the title an homage to Camus), Edwidge Danticat reflects on her early response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti: "It was too soon to even try to write, I told myself. … So I did what I always do when my own words fail me. I read."

Good advice. Toni Morrison reminded us before this election, in March 2015 in the 150th-anniversary issue of *The Nation*, that the intention of dictators and tyrants is to "limit or erase the imagination that art provides, as well as the critical thinking of scholars and journalists." So as I finish writing this essay, twelve days after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, my dad reports that he's rereading *All the King's Men* and Elmer Kelton cowboy novels.

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[1]Actually, no way could I have written Parag Khanna's fascinating long piece titled "Want to understand how Trump happened? Study quantum physics." The gist is that, because "we only treat states 'as if' they are real" and "states have no immutable essence," the Newtonian reality might be that Donald Trump is soon to be President of the United States, but the underlying quantum reality – terrifying but also bracing, if we're willing to embrace it – is that the United States of America doesn't actually exist.

I'm happily following Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police as he sleuths his way through another Tony Hillerman novel. Dennis Rea, for his part, is

> viewing events through the wider frame of the philosophies of John Gray, J.G. Ballard, and others of that ilk, which to me represent a very truthful take on reality rather than a wild-eyed, speculative mental exercise. To wit, I keep thinking of that old trope, "the people get the leaders they deserve," and while that may seem wildly unfair to downtrodden minorities who've been systematically denied full partnership in the human race, for me it all goes back to the contention that *homo sap* is a tragically flawed biological experiment, with inbuilt self-destructive tendencies, who over countless millennia have demonstrated an inability to learn from the past and rise above our baser instincts, repeatedly bringing down ruin upon ourselves and the planet. By that token, we've reaped what we've sown, harsh as that judgment may sound. One of the articles that went around spoke of the "inevitability" of this latest impasse, and I think that's spot-on. Of course the almost universally held folly that humans are the *ne plus ultra* of evolution only metastasizes said destructive tendencies, and I've always rejected that line of thinking out of hand. Trump might represent a mad Captain Ahab leading us all in a predestined charge into oblivion.

Hardly cheering thoughts, which is why I'm reading Hillerman. But I'm also reading *Secondhand Time,* the haunting oral history of the fall of the Soviet Union by Svetlana Alexievich, the journalist awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature. Speaking of the August 1991 reactionary putsch against Gorbachev that failed

after hundreds of thousands of citizens went out on the streets, soldiers refused to fire on them, and Boris Yeltsin gave a stirring speech standing atop a tank, one of Alexievich's informants tells her: "Tsarist Russia, as you can read in the memoirs, slipped away in three days, and the same went for communism."

And another tells her: "The old words weren't enough, and we didn't yet know new ones."

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