ACADEMIA | Letters

Is America Possible?

Don Hanlon Johnson

> O, let America be America again—
>
> The land that never has been yet—
>
> And yet must be—
>
> The land where every man is free.[1]

I found myself at a rare impasse as I approached making a few words for this new venture of Academic.edu. The events of the past 12 months have been so disruptive at many levels from the intimate to the international that I had to make an unusual effort to express anything of sense in the face of such massive human and earthly tides. I found myself settling in when the above title occurred to me, inspired by the poetry of Langston Hughes, borrowed from my late friend and colleague Vincent Harding's monograph. These two heirs of the most pernicious aspects of American history reminded me that "democracy" is not as something we have had and come close to losing, but what we are still struggling to shape.

> . . . it is precisely in a period of great spiritual and psychological hunger like our own that we most need to open minds, hearts, and memories to those times when women and men actually dreamed of new possibilities for our nation, for our world, and for their own lives. It is now that we may be able to convey the stunning idea that dreams, imagination, vision, and hope are actually powerful mechanisms in the creation of new realities—especially when the dreams go be-

[1] *The Poetry of the Negro*, 1746-1970, ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York: Garden City, 1970), pp. 193-195.

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yond speeches and songs to become embodied; to take on flesh, in real, hard places."[2]

These visionaries did not indulge themselves in lamenting the discouraging realities strewn about us, but kept courageously to the ongoing task to retool, learn, reshape, stand together. With their inspiration I turn once again to a question that propelled my work for over half a century: how do we move "beyond speeches and songs to become embodied?" I would add: and also beyond the fragmented communities created by radically different abstract beliefs about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?"

Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* addresses this question in light of the rise of Communism and Fascism in Europe in the 1930s, and eventually a critique of fascist aspects of America itself which charged him with carrying an unlicensed medical device across state lines without the proper permit, and imprisoned him in the penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where he died. The FDA held a a public burning of all his published books in 1956 when many mistakenly believed that our nation of reasonable laws had moved beyond the burning of witches and suspected books!

Reich argues that fascism owes its survival in its many forms at least in part to the widespread dissociation of people from their sensitive and sensual bodies. That dissociation creates a vulnerability to charismatic authoritarians luring their followers into clinging to abstract ideas like "MAGA"over the fleshy struggles of everyday life. As a way of making sense of this repetitive fall into social passivity, Reich asks readers to study exemplars of more democratic communities which arise when people are joined in helping each other when faced with urgent needs of surviving war, natural disasters, and pandemics.

During the past year, for example, there is a dramatic contrast between the international community of virologists and that of political leaders. Within hours after biomedical researchers in Wuhan discovered the hints of a dangerous new virus, they were in communications with colleagues in Bethesda and other major laboratories initiating one of the most rapid and widespread research projects ever taken. With the vaccines now issuing forth after the trials, a new medical subcommunity is forming to distribute millions of doses of the vaccine throughout the world. By contrast, in the other world of politics, we are just now beginning to emerge from months under the thumbs of loud, thoughtless, ideologically driven totalitarians who can barely find enough sense at least to get out of the way of handling the medical crisis, let alone jeopardize it in favor of their political interests. The first group are joined in their deep commitments to studying a highly defined death-dealing microscopic en-

[2] *Is America Possible? A letter to My Young Companions on the Journey of Hope* (Kalamazoo, MI: Fetzer Institute, 2005), p. 36.

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tity so as to reduce death and pain. The second group can barely reach any agreements about all the important matters which face us as a political entity.

In *On Revolution* Hannah Arendt points out that 'revolution' means revolving: when the old revolutionaries—Russian, French, American, Egyptian, . . .—are successful, they eventually become the new oppressors, as we have seen close to home among the militias.[3]

In *Democracy and Education,*[4] John Dewey articulated the elusive but obvious fact that the success of a democratic society depends on people who have learned to embody democracy in their ability not only to tolerate diversity, but to rejoice in it as a wellspring of creative action and thought. To be such a person requires a long work of education and practice, of learning how to challenge one's blind spots and machine-like responses to fear and pain.

Those are but a few of the many clues about how I might keep hacking through the thickets of the forest that is "democracy," trying to make at least small contributions towards making it more possible. For me that has implied helping democratically-yearning working groups of various kinds to become more skilled at turning their attentions away from divisive abstractions into shared concerns about measures to deal with our more primal problems as endangered humans living on an endangered planet: tending to our shared wounds, nurturing our shared desires for connection and the pleasures of this body and this earth. Spurred on by Amanda Gorman's Inauguration poem "The Hill We Climb": "We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be: a country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free."

[3] New York: Penguin, 1963.

[4] New York: Macmillan, 1916.

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