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How To Love Trump



By Marty Kaplan



CARLOS BARRIA / REUTERS

For a majority of Americans, feeling traumatized and terrified are reasonable responses to the words “President-elect Trump.” But even if his inauguration marks the demise of the star-spangled mythos we grew up on, being catatonic is no way to spend the next four years, especially if we’re lucky enough to survive, oh, a nuclear war. But acceptance of Trump — acceptance is the last of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s five stages of dealing with death — is hardly chicken soup for our souls. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, Trump: that can’t be the best we can do.

Why not love? Those thousands at Trump’s rallies, those millions who voted for him: many of them do seem to love him. Well, maybe the rest of us can, too!

Impossible? Recall what the Queen of Hearts told Alice when she said it was impossible to believe the Queen was 101: Believing impossible things takes practice. “When I was your age,” she said, “I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Try it. (1) Trump won an electoral college landslide. (2) Trump won the popular vote. (3) Goldman Sachs and Exxon Mobil are the best friends of forgotten Americans. (4) No one has more respect for women than Donald Trump. (5) Mexico will pay for the wall. (6) Up is down, black is white and day is night.

Facts getting in the way of that? That's why post-truthers have more fun. But put in half-an-hour a day, and by Inauguration Day you'll be believing every word that comes out of Kellyanne Conway's mouth.

No? So what's your real problem with Trump? The guilt? Get over it.

From Beverly Hills to Short Hills, there are taste tribes for whom there's no such thing as too much gold leaf, gold paint or bling. As a 12-year-old, I was fully complicit in my mother's choice of a "conversation piece" for the gold-carpeted living room of our new suburban split level, a tower of three "antiqued" gold cherubs with a jeweled lampshade sprouting from the forehead of the chubby child on top. If guilt like that was regal enough for Kaplans, surely it's fitting for our 21st century *roi soleil*, so please park the snark when the new White House decorator goes a little Versailles on us.

Or is the problem the guilt? You can get over that, too.

You watch *Say Yes to the Dress*, don't you? *Real Housewives of Atlanta*? You keep up with the Kardashians? Like those nominally unscripted soaps, the Trump Show is a guilty pleasure, too — digital junk food, political empty calories, the "reality" formerly known as reality. Trump's hat may say "Make America Great Again," but his meta-hat says, Let me entertain you. The twitter taunts, the billionaire boys club, the mayhem at rallies, the humiliated rivals, the insulted, dishonest media: As Russell Crowe asks in *Gladiator*, "Are you not entertained?"

Look at the promotional campaign MSNBC is running for its anchors. The print ad features a tight close-up of Trump's face. The text reads, "What will he do?" Beneath that, "What won't he do?" And beneath that, an indictment — not of him, but of us: "This is why you watch." At the bottom, flanked by photos of its anchors, are the MSNBC logo and a tag line: "This is who we are." *New York* magazine writer Joe Hagan tweeted about it, "This ad nails everything that is wrong with the media. Fascism as ratings spectacle." If you grieve over the audience's addiction to disaster porn, if you mourn the news-as-entertainment business model that fostered it, then you're bound to feel guilty about watching, and you've got a rough ride ahead. But if, instead, you treat boredom like a fate worse than tyranny, if you medicate civic A.D.H.D. with always-breaking BREAKING NEWS, if you mistake engagement with social media for actual citizen participation, you're gonna rock these next four years.

Trump voters love the rupture with the American political narrative that he ran on. But if the popular vote is any guide to the country's mood, I suspect that fear of the future is now more widespread than exhilaration that anything can happen. The truth is that no one has a clue what's next. That's not fun; it's frightening.

The next commander-in-chief is an impulsive, deceitful, corrupt, intellectually lazy megalomaniac. That's a delicious character disorder for the villain of a comic book, and it's ideally suited to a news industry whose audience is addicted to melodrama and whose narrative technique maximizes suspense, surprise and dread. Though horror is a thrilling genre, and real-time tension is irresistible to our animal appetites, there's no guarantee that the scary story we're living through will have a happy ending.

"This is why you watch." Really? To torture ourselves wondering how bad things can get? To have a front row seat for the last days of American democracy?

There's an awesome opportunity that responsible journalism can rise to right now. The repeal of Obamacare begs to be framed not as a retributive power struggle between political parties, but as a moral struggle for a diverse people to define a good society. Climate change cries out to be covered not as a farce about ignorance, but as an epic about the survival of our species. Explaining economic policy requires risky honesty from the media about inequality, and a fearless, patient commitment to educating its audiences. That's not the same as keeping the country watching by keeping it on the edge of a nervous breakdown.

An avalanche of coverage of the first 100 days of Trump is imminent. How will the media do? We know how brilliantly they did covering the primaries and the general. They made a lot of dough doing it. It's wishful thinking, I know, but imagine if there were a different yardstick for how well they tell the next part of the story. That would really be something to love.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.