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The Loneliness of the American Leftist

By John Eskow
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To be a leftist in modern America is to be acutely lonely. The far right has Fox; the center-right has MSNBC; the slightly-less-center-right has CNN. (These last two networks switched places in recent months, as MSNBC degenerated from a yawn-inducing faux-liberal blather-shop into Hillary Clinton's pant-suit politburo.) Every minute, 24/7, the dullards and sell-outs of the corporate media channel the functionaries of both major parties to depict leftists as dangerous, petulant lunatics—the modern-day version of 1920s newspapers showing us as bomb-throwing anarchists. Of course, we are not allowed to speak for ourselves, because that would immediately destroy the caricature.

We all want to belong to a team. How wonderful it'd be to wholeheartedly believe in a credo shared by tens of millions of Americans—or just one or two co-workers! To support a Trump or a Clinton on a cellular level. To proudly slip into that bright red or blue jersey and cheer lustily from the bleachers whenever our team scores a run. I bet 75% of the professed members of the Democratic Party are, in their souls, profoundly estranged from what that party has become. But they wriggle into that ill-fitting I'm With Her jersey and convince themselves they're part of a massive "we," because they feel, half-consciously, that the only alternative is terminal loneliness.

If we were as far to the right as we are to the left, our friends would be running a major TV network. Think of it: we could just pick up a remote and flick on a channel where our world-view is taken for granted as mere common sense. And we could watch one of these conventions

with a cold beer and a rooting interest, misty-eyed at the spectacle of thousands of our brothers and sisters celebrating our shared beliefs with balloons and goofy hats.

But we don't control these weapons of mass dissemination, so in order to share our ideas and feelings we turn to websites, magazines, and other run-and-gun guerrilla media. Anyone who writes for these publications, and who is cavalier enough about his own mental health to post an e-mail address, will receive—in addition to the dreary paint-by-numbers put-downs of Donald Trump supporters, and some psychotic but oddly-well-researched personal attacks—a good deal of friendly e-mail from all over the country, and beyond. You get encouraging right-ons, and sharp, fair-minded criticism—and many howls of rage over tiny errors in grammar or spelling, which seem to rouse would-be English teachers on both the left and right to mouth-foaming fury. But how wonderful to see the sheer variety of lefties reaching out from the cyber-hinterlands! A luncheonette owner in Georgia. A journalist for The China Post. The daughter of a great blues-rock guitarist. Alienated office-workers. An ornithologist. A sex therapist. An actor on one of the many CSI shows. A financial lawyer bored by his practice. A homeless transgender teenager. “A thousand points of light,” as George Bush Sr might have put it. In dark moments, I wish I could put little red bulbs on an electric map of America, one for each of my correspondents, and switch on my enlightened America map whenever I get discouraged, i.e. thirty or forty times a day. In some parts of the map, there would even be clusters of lights—but there would be long, dead stretches of map-terrain with just one or two lonely bulbs, some of them starting to flicker out.

I didn't want to identify my e-mail correspondents in any more detail, because some say they can't even risk sharing their beliefs in public—either out of concern for their job safety or just more discomfort in the workplace. And while some of these far-flung correspondents are no doubt wired in to communities of like-minded human beings, it's achingly clear from their messages that many of them —probably most—are not. Reading the yearning for community in some of these notes can make you feel like a socialist Miss Lonelyhearts. “Dear ‘Left Out in Waukegan’: hang in there! One of these days you’ll find your Left-Wing Mister Right!” “Dear ‘Stranger at My Own Thanksgiving Dinner’: well, if they don't think NAFTA should be repealed, then they don't deserve your mushroom stuffing anyhow!”

The irony of feeling disconnected as a leftist is that it's that very instinct for connection that inspired most of us to our beliefs in the first place—a keen awareness, soul-deep, that self-interest is a dead end; that we are brother and sister even to those people most strange and bewildering to us; that we move forward as one and backwards alone. Those are the feelings and perceptions that originally woke us up and compelled us to fight (and I just had a vision of Lawrence Welk waving his baton amid the champagne bubbles: “A-ladies an’ a gennelmen, here is the great Nick Lowe, asking de musical qvestion, *“What’s So Funny ‘bout Peace Love and Understanding?”*”)

Absurdity. My personal go-to defense against that loneliness—the crucifix I wave to ward off The Angst Vampire. But sometimes that humor feels too black; the other day I looked back at my stuff and wondered: Jesus, when did I become this caustic rage-bag? I think, or at least I hope, that most people who know me as a three-dimensional human being would describe me as a fairly amiable fellow, kind to dogs and guinea-pigs, quick to pick up toddlers when they trip on the sidewalk; slightly jaundiced around the gills, maybe, but at heart an upbeat and fun-lovin’

kinda guy. But when I scan back over my on-line yammerings, sometimes I'm taken aback by the hatred I find in myself. I mock, I revile, I bitch, I cheap-shot. I know full well that most of this invective is a violent disgorging of the crap that's stuffed down our throats every day—a kind of peristalsis of the spirit—but man cannot live by vomiting alone. Some kind of nourishment is required, too. What am I doing to help build a sense of community?

When I was 17 years old I had the extraordinary good fortune to become Abbie Hoffman's sidekick, the Robin to his revolutionary Batman. Playing off a then-common style of titling Disney movies, he used to call me "The Littlest Yippie." It was a long, glorious, and heartbreaking adventure to be Abbie's friend, and it did not end happily. But when I catch myself succumbing to the angst of feeling alone in the fight, I flash back to what was best about Abbie, that spectacularly-flawed but life-enhancing rebel: his sense that the only way to be fully alive was to join the fight against injustice—that it's not only a moral responsibility to kick against the pricks, it's also an endorphin high.

In 1968, Jim Morrison could assert that "they got the guns, but we got the numbers." It wasn't really true even then, and it's definitely not true now. But, as America learned in Viet Nam, numbers are not the only measure of an army's strength. You are not alone, "Left Out in Waukegan!" You have more friends than you could possibly know.

Maybe I'll really build that electric map of America and watch as the lights multiply.