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The Existential Vacuum and Our Present Moment

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, November 11th, 2020

BIDEN BEATS TRUMP

My Donald Trump Existential Moment

When and how did Donald Trump enter my life? Having been a professional working in New York for four decades, it was impossible to avoid his presence. I did not read the tabloids, but his aborted romances and real estate fiascos were good copy for *The New York Times*. A legion of ugly apartment buildings bearing his name began appearing all over the city. Trump Tower at Fifth and 56th, next to Tiffany and opposite Bergdorf Goodman injected glitz into a dignified shopping area. We once shared an elevator at the Met Life Building. I found his presence to be intrusive. As a big person, he occupied a large portion of the elevator cab; however, he never stopped talking from the ground floor to the 25th. Nor did he stop moving, wiggling. In my mind, he was a colossal jerk, the kind of outsized personality that only New York can breed. He reminded me of a limo driver from Brooklyn who bragged about how he had secured a nest egg for his family and resources for his daughter's law school expenses by assembling a collection of taxi cab medallions. Once worth tens of thousands, in the age of Uber, they are virtually worthless. When I heard that Trump was running for President, I thought that it was a joke. Unfortunately, he did it and won.

Last Sunday, as I was reading the *Sunday New York Times*, I stopped for a moment, saying, "Is this Sunday? If so, what happened to the rest of the week?" The Presidential election was on Tuesday and conclusive results could not be announced until Friday. I had attempted to return to my normal routine; however, a strange cloud of disorientation was hanging over my head. Was the insanity and chaos that Donald Trump had been manifesting going to continue or were we going to return to our previous less than perfect world?

Several days later, it is still impossible to make reliable predictions about how the Democrats and Republicans will resolve their differences. Hopefully, it will become increasingly clear that Trump's control has been minimized to the point of being more nuisance than powerful. History presents us with a legion of tyrants whose reins have ended with different outcomes: Hitler committed suicide—cyanide and shooting himself; Napoleon was exiled to Elba; Roman Emperor Caligula was stabbed by two members of his guards. However, much as he has done throughout his career, Donald Trump persists in claiming non-existent authority. In his lexicon, you win and never lose.

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist/neurologist who was a Holocaust survivor, developed his thesis of the *existential vacuum* as a common denominator for people released from oppressive

conditions and confronted with adjusting and assimilating into less toxic social conditions. His 1946 psychological memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*, is a meditation on what the gruesome experience of Auschwitz taught him about the primary purpose of life, the quest for [meaning](#), which sustained those who survived. For Frankl, meaning came from three possible sources: [purposeful work](#), [love](#), and [courage in the face of difficulty](#).

He states that:

Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.

We were at work in a trench. The dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in the pale light of dawn; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces. I was again conversing silently with my wife, or perhaps I was struggling to find the *reason* for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious “Yes” in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted there, in the midst of the miserable grey of a dawning morning in Bavaria. “*Et lux in tenebris lucet*” — and the light shineth in the darkness. For hours I stood hacking at the icy ground. The guard passed by, insulting me, and once again I communed with my beloved. More and more I felt that she was present, that she was with me; I had the feeling that I was able to touch her, able to stretch out my hand and grasp hers. The feeling was very strong: she was there. Then, at that very moment, a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadily at me.

Viktor Frankl's thesis bears as much validity today as it did sixty-five years ago. Our collective recovery from four years of Donald Trump is going to be tempestuous because he supports a legacy. As we struggle to recover, we need to think of a positive and joyous future as our objective.

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