

"Don't worry Judy, we'll get it taken care of."

Those are the words of my late grandmother, and the 'it' to which she was referring is myself. I cannot remember when exactly my mother first told me of this exchange, except to say I was quite young. She presented that statement to me with one of her own, which was that from the moment she found out she was pregnant, she knew that she was keeping the child, but could not imagine a world where such a thing was not her choice.

At the time my mother became pregnant she was divorced and single, had recently started a new career and was caring for my grandmother as she died of ovarian cancer. Though my father lived in another country, and has never been a part of my life as anything other than a phantom, my mother did tell him of my existence, at the same time as she told him she neither wanted, nor would she accept, any money from him. She did not want anyone to ever be able to dispute her custody, her decision to be a mother.

As painful as the sentiment voiced by my grandmother may have been for me to hear, it does express an even more painful truth : that to be a woman, and to affirmatively choose the terms of one's life, makes her an object of derision in our society. This lesson was hardly new to my mother, having been raised in the suburbs of the 1950s, going on to become the first woman in the oil and gas banking division of Texas Commerce Bank in the 1970s, working as a corporate consultant in the 1980s, before pursuing a career in academia.

Upon learning of her pregnancy, she was presented with an impossible dilemma : to be scorned for exercising her right to abort me, or derrided for choosing to be the single mother of a bastard child while also having a career. Given the circumstances, she faced condemnation on all sides.

It is not that our society hates when women have a choice, our society hates when women make any decision other than deferent refusal - to a spouse or partner, a man, a president, a father or God. The only acceptable solution, it seems, is chastity until rape.

There were two principles that guided how my mother raised me : first, that if I was able to formulate a question then I deserved an honest answer, and second, that she would not censor what I was exposed to; she allowed me to watch, listen to, and read anything I was curious about, on the condition that she would as well, and we would have a discussion about it after; nothing was off limits so long as my engagement was critical. Passive acceptance was the only unacceptable response. She understood that to coddle me by ignoring or denying real, if hideous, phenomena would not protect me, it would only ill-equip me to handle them when inevitably confronted.

Despite all that, her worthiness and capability to be a parent without a man was still questioned. While growing up I was the only one of my friends or neighbors who did not have two parents, and we were judged for it.

In elementary school I would come home in the afternoons and be alone for several hours until she finished work. One day, when I was out sick from school, I received a phone call. It was a man's voice. He was from the Department of Children and Family Services investigating an anonymous complaint that my mother had been neglecting me, that to be a single mother with a career is tantamount to child abuse. After speaking with the man, explaining why I was home and that my mother was at work, I immediately called her. Panic stalled the pain of this accusation. Within the hour, the three of us met in our living room so the man could interview me. Following our conversation the complaint was deemed to be without merit and was dismissed. If you want to attack a mother, attack her child; and if you want to attack a child, which is to say any of us, attack their mother.

When I first began writing what I would read today it bore no resemblance to the text I give you now. In re-reading Zoe Leonard's piece from 1992, I kept thinking, I don't want a president, I don't want to be represented by someone else, and I am skeptical that having a president from any of the unlikely backgrounds listed would necessarily solve our problem, in the same way that having a black president did not signal the end of racism. Following these thoughts I wrote a metaphorical text about the impossibility of an image, or representation, and the necessity of pursuing the impossible, advocating for the transition into a state of ceaseless revolt and self-interrogation.

That text opened with:

'I want to begin with an image: an abyss, which is, in fact, not an image at all but a concept, an idea by definition immeasurable except by the imagination. When one imagines an abyss, it is necessarily only a partial image, the other part being an illegible darkness. Perhaps this darkness is bordered, at least to one side, by an oceanic cliff, coming into focus at the perimeter and dissolving as it approaches the central depth. But this cliff is not the abyss of which I am speaking, or you thinking. The cliff is material, whereas an abyss, like the imagination that conceives of it, is defined precisely by its immateriality. The cliff is just a frame to facilitate comprehension of the non-image contained within it. At the same time as an abyss represents an unknown, unknowable, non-space that serves as the birthplace of imaginable horror, it is also a site of potential. I must not forget that dreams and nightmares come from the same place, and to be immeasurable is not the same as to be infinite. There is a floor at the bottom of an abyss, an end, or a beginning, even if I never see it.'

Upon reflection, I came to realize several things that caused me to abandon the course of that text. The first being that I was attempting to critique representations with a metaphor, which is itself a representation, thus the text felt hypocritical. Second, and more importantly, I realized that to even hold such a belief, that I do not want to be represented by a president at all, amounted to history and elitism speaking through me - that I am able to think that because I have been told my entire life, and by all of history preceding my life, that I am, as a man, as a white person, able-bodied and from an upper-middle class, that I am capable, and worthy, of representing myself, that I have a voice. This message is not violent, but its selective communication is.

In re-visiting Leonard's text and the questions it poses - those of what one wants and what has been conspicuously absent, as well as, in the context of this moment, what has changed - I understood that what I want is for the focus to shift, both my own and that of others. I want to listen and for others to listen, not just to hear or be heard; one can disregard that which they hear, but **listening** requires attention, thought, and consideration. My mother recently pointed out that 'one is never tortured by that which they do not think about.'

Darkness did not befall us in the recent election, I believe that we have been living in darkness our whole lives, and the situation we are in now is only a degenerative symptom, not the cause, of that darkness; that in November a voice spoke to us, not in a whisper, saying that the darkness we have known still reigns and anything resembling light is, if not unimaginably, then at least immeasurably, distant. What I want is a different mode, not circumstance, of being.

Thank you for listening.

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