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Social Justice



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by Sr. Joan Chittister

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Most of our lives depend on our promises. Most of life is a vow to do something, to be a sign of fidelity and persistence wherever we strive. We understand that to be faithful to commitments is the currency of character. To carry on — always, relentlessly, quietly, steadfastly — we are given to understand at a very early age, is the gold standard of life.

That's the fantasy of the good life.

The reality of the good life is that there are more things to which we give our hearts than our hearts can possibly deserve or possibly endure. And so? So, we must come to understand that only by leaving some of our deepest commitments behind can we ever really fan the spark of the promises that have priority in our lives.

In fact, no promise can really be kept without disavowing something else.

The point is that whatever deters us from being true to our deepest truths must one day be disavowed. Then, instead of being bound by lesser commitments we can come to concentrate on the things our souls know we are born to become.

The commanding consciousness in times such as these, then, is that there are very few things in life we are really meant to spend ourselves for without reservation: love, citizenship, integrity, faith. What else?

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Maybe it's the "what else" that is making life so difficult right now when life as we have always known it has come undone. Now when the old certainties have disappeared: Is the United States really still the hometown of the world? Will the poor really get support from the government? Or will more of our families, our children, be living in cars and tents and cardboard boxes in a country that balances

its national budget on the backs of its women and children as one program after another is shrunken or dissolved altogether in what we call "the richest country in the world"?

To what are we committed as a nation now on this planet more bruised and broken by the day?

Even responsibility to the governmental ideals we were taught to honor as children are now being broken by the politicians themselves. The guardians of the Constitution and its justice system, once the gold standard of what it meant to be an American, now look more and more every day like political hirelings from a banana republic robbing the people on their way to the bank.

So what must be disavowed to save the character of the nation in a time when it needs character more than ever?

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> —Joan Chittister
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We must disavow our personal distance from inconvenient issues.

The "survival of the fittest" is not a law of nature; it is a corruption of nature that has been unleashed on Twitter and Facebook with venom and with lies. Social media has become a giant mirror of the self —shone to the world in all its glory. And all the while, the faces that need help, that need our awareness, that need a second start we are failing, as a nation, to see.

So much, we argue, constrains us from requiring accountability: privacy, personal power, institutional bureaucracies. So, many who have no one to hear their needs find themselves sleeping on streets or dying in small, dark rooms no financially secure citizen would ever have to face. To refound the real America again, we must disavow the present system and everything it does to create this environment, to wage this war against the poor.

We must disavow simplistic answers to major social issues that touch others but not ourselves.

"Of course. Of course," we say as we brush off the topics we're tired of hearing about. After all, these slouchers, these cheaters, these foreigners whose deportations we applaud could have applied for entry to the country the right way, right? And all those locals who are clogging the emergency system, they could have had insurance, too, right?

But they don't and all we really know is that there are some who have fallen on hard times and we don't have a clue where they could possibly get help. Unless, of course, they could get the help we once offered but which now we refuse to give.

For that day to come, then, we must disavow much we have casually avowed. For instance:

We must disavow political parties and party-line votes.

We are so accustomed to thinking that Democrats are for the poor and Republicans for the rich we can, if we vote at all, vote by rote. So we vote but nothing changes. Every election we pull the party-line lever that confirms all the old ideas. Surely there is an explanation for this. Maybe someone who has been sitting in a Congressional chair for years could start by telling us how it can be that year after year the same Congress refuses to consider and amend and reconcile bills that are genuinely good for everybody — like insurance, education, health care and child care.

Better yet, we could stop voting for the herd and begin to scrutinize every politician one person, one record at a time. Then, with the spotlight on each of them, we might see some genuine commitment, something by which we can measure their own commitments. Before the next election.

It's time to vote again for one person, one platform, one issue they promise to attend to for us, one report card at a time rather than one party-line at a time.



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We must disavow political monarchies.

It's time to think again about term limits. Then, maybe legislators would begin to represent us rather than launch their eternal candidacies and begin running for their next term the minute they claim the present one.

Yes, we have had political leaders — like John McCain, Teddy Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Nancy Pelosi, John Lewis, Elijah Cummings — whose long-time vision we would like to see emerge again. But where are figures like those? In either house? In our time? So we vote for their parties over and over again — as if the party was itself the standard bearer of political valor.

Indeed, the notion of life-long seats rather than term limits in both the House and the Senate must be disavowed. Then those whose time it is to leave their seats may

point with pride at the standard they set for every term after them to see and follow.

We must disavow political poetry as a substitute for political philosophy and political positions.

We must disavow political dog whistles: " A Chicken in Every Pot," "Peace and Prosperity," "America Needs A Change," "Leave No Child Behind," and "Make America Great Again." They are empty promises that cannot be defined. They promise a promise. They promise universal change without universal understanding and so voters give universal support to another political novel of fiction and fantasy.

Then, in the end, we moan, not so much because nothing changes, but because we ourselves have answered a political dog whistle rather than insisted on a political direction.

We must disavow our own distance from the resolution of the pain.

From where I stand, it's time for us as voters to be more specific about what must be done to make America America again. At that point, no representative will be able to ride an eternal chair into the political sunset without accountability. Then no single Speaker of the House can possibly throttle the bills, suppress the debates, disallow the votes that would make the Congress a Congress again.

In fact, the political virtue of disavowal may be the only thing we have at our disposal to move away from the ownership of lifetime Congressional chairs to the revival of genuine political commitment to the welfare of the entire country.

This time by the politicians themselves.

[Joan Chittister is a Benedictine sister of Erie, Pennsylvania.]

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