Opinion
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Social Justice



A supporter of former U.S. President Donald Trump and an anti-Trump demonstrator argue near the Wilkie D. Ferguson Jr. U.S. Courthouse, on the day Trump appeared for his arraignment on classified document charges, in Miami June 13. (OSV News/Reuters/Marco Bello)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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If we have become aware of anything at all since Donald Trump appeared on our doorsteps, it must surely be what we learned from our parents years ago. "You'll need to do two things to get through life," my dad said. "Learn math and tell the truth."

The simplicity stuck with me. The math, not so much. The truth, an imperative. Always. So here it comes.

From the minute the escalator stopped on the mezzanine floor of Trump Tower, I felt the challenge of truth rise in me: I had heard enough about Trump over the years that I was already uncomfortable. There was something unconvincing about him. Something I did not trust. I could not imagine this man as the president of the United States, not if character was still a value in the national soul.

First, I thought the pomposity he brought was a lie in itself. I simply could not understand how it was that a man of whom the New York newspapers had for years been recording business frauds and tax evasions, womanizing and accusations of sexual assault, and a narcissism that generated run-on insults of anyone whom he considered any competition to himself could be so astoundingly self-centered in a world in need.

Somewhere along the line, I had been taught that the presidency of the United States was grounded on the integrity of a Washington, a Jefferson, an Adams, or a Lincoln, an FDR or Eisenhower and, in our own time, of a Carter and Reagan and Obama. And I counted on that quality. After all, I was sure, no American would choose less.

But as the months went by, I discovered that there was a great deal more truth than that to tell.The real truth is that as he had rambled on, corrupting one monument to honor after another, I had stopped thinking about Trump at all. Shocked as I was to see him elected as the ethical model and moral doorman for the country, I knew intuitively that there was more to the Great American Moral Collapse than simply

Trump himself.



Former President Donald Trump delivers remarks during an event at Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey, June 13. (OSV News/Reuters/Amr Alfiky)

I had begun, instead, to wonder about something far more worrisome than one man prowling the world's political stage for the sake of his own self-aggrandizement — strutting to identify himself with one class and smirking to reject another. No, now I found myself wondering what kind of people we were who would simply accept it all.

Here was new American politics where the lying, the language, the late-night TV show were being used to squeeze the concept of "Republic" out of the United States and turn it into a demagoguery minus a Senate-approved Cabinet. We had gotten ourselves a tiny little king.

But how? Who was voting for him? Who would put someone like that — an accused liar, thief, rapist, egomaniac — into the highest office in the land? And why? Who

would support this kind of political chicanery themselves?

What kind of people — what kind of country — were we who would simply step aside and allow the walls of decency, dignity and public political values to collapse? And all of it with the kids of the nation in the room watching us and who now, as a result, had no political steel of the soul left to admire.

Living through this kind of presidency once is difficult enough. The very thought that this could become the tone of America's politics in the future is dizzying. Terrifying maybe: As in, bring on the guns. Stop the immigrants. Forget the allies. Dally with dictatorships. And you can forget "Invictus," too — "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul" — as you watch our democracy go slowly by.

The questions, of course, are what we ourselves need to concentrate on. How could so major a social, moral, systemic change happen in the United States? Journalists reported that *Republicans* — Trump's congressional representatives and senators — were/are afraid of him.

Oh, come now. Grow up.

Whatever the kind of social destruction with which Trump poisoned the country, where are the voices that should be confronting it?

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In fact, why was there no contention, no confrontation at all? Not even when the capital of the United States was under siege by MAGA, by our own people. Where were the men and women who had always been seen as the starch and soul of the nation? Where were the political parties that were "our checks and balances"?

And then I got an insight of another kind, a greater kind, an even more dangerous kind of truth.

The question has really become whether the country itself has simply collapsed any and all moral standards. So much for the "George Washington and the cherry tree" fable to spur our courage, our own integrity?

How did this happen? Who tricked us out of ourselves? And most of all, why are we saying nothing about that awareness? Are we saying it aloud? Are we saying it in

front of the children so they can at least know that what is happening is wrong?

The big question is the basic one: Where are we getting our values these days? From the books we ban, so students can't ask for the explanations we don't want to give them? Is it from burying, or rewriting, our own history so the new demagogues can do what they want to do with the husk of it? As in, ignore the Native treaties, deny the slave markets, build the racist jails, forget the children's cages on the border so we can forget the people we throw away as if they are simply things — not Black and white and brown, not human, not children of God.

And all of this in our time. In our country. By our voting system.

From where I stand, it seems to me that out there, in the American population, is a people standing with their heads bowed down while our "democracy" begins to swing in the breeze because our so-called representatives forget these days to honor the Constitution that created us, and which they had sworn to defend. And while we forget to vote, while 43% of us don't even bother to go to the polls.

Instead, we waste our own civil duties. We don't even know what's being proposed while the government-behind-a-government tiptoes through life at our expense.

What's the point? Simple.

What we have seen these years explains to us the failure of the people who have the responsibility to make America great again: *us*. For that, we have nothing to fear, perhaps, except our own lack of involvement in the conversation.

If we ourselves step up, express our positions, and work together everywhere to shape a national position on the local bipartisan stage, if we would start by demanding that the Congress itself work together for all our sakes, we'd be America again.

The philosopher-statesman Edmund Burke, in guiding the country through the British-American struggles of the 18th century, teaches us something important here, too, perhaps. He writes: "When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle."

Think it over. For all our sakes.