Columns
Spirituality



(Dreamstime/Maryia Samalevich)



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My two longest ministries were the 15 years I spent in Washington, D.C., with Network, a national Catholic social justice lobby, and the years with the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue, which I founded in 2002. Faith and politics — for some, an oxymoron; for me, entangled realities needing each other.

This brings me to a very difficult and conflicted moment as I prepare for both the presidential election on Nov. 5 and, equally important, the aftermath, regardless of the winner.

My political self has sustained my interest in politics and how through our electoral and legislative processes, we can help make real many of the values and principles that are part of the long tradition of Catholic social justice teaching. I understand that we will differ on specific positions, for example, regarding respect for life, addressing the climate crisis, or curbing gun violence. In our U.S. system, we must take a position and advocate for it. Sometimes there is bipartisan support for a bill; other times it is primarily one party that strongly supports it.

When I was in D.C., I worked with Republicans and Democrats, and compromise was a value. Individuals and parties won sometimes and lost sometimes, hoping to bring the issue back up the next year. There are rules and expectations that are assumed and followed. Rational debate, free and fair elections, and the peaceful transfer of power are hallmarks of our democracy.

Until they are not.

I feel I have fallen down the rabbit hole and find myself seated at the mad Hatter's tea party. Although preparation for the tea party has been happening for many years, the mad Hatter wants to sit at the head of the table once again. Since Donald Trump came on the scene, the assumptions and expectations of our system of government — three independent branches, executive, legislative and judicial, with checks and balances — have been turned upside down.

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An independent Supreme Court becomes beholden to the positions of the president who appointed them.

A Congress that serves the interests of the whole country becomes rigidly partisan, blocking compromise to advance legislation based on the political impact on one's election and the desires of the Republican candidate for office.

An executive branch led by a president responsible for the welfare of the country, whose duty is to protect our Constitution and the rule of law, is being sought after by a convicted felon.

Trump's incoherent speeches consistently demean immigrants, repeating that they have "invaded and conquered" certain cities; that they are taking Black or Latino jobs; or that they are eating people's pets, even as these claims are proven unfounded by reliable sources, including local officials. He calls for the death penalty for "any migrant that kills an American citizen."

His opponents are painted in the worst possible way, making them seem inhuman in the eyes of many. He says he will get rid of the "enemies within," who are the people and news stations challenging or opposing him. He is willing to seek revenge, employing the National Guard or the military if necessary.

Unlike most of the people who have led this country, it seems Trump was educated in the school of the Mock Turtle, one of the characters Alice meets down the rabbit hole, who describes his education in subjects like Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision. Perhaps the Queen in the story is also a role model as she keeps calling "off with their heads" for almost everyone.

In the story, Alice wakes up and realizes that the people she met are not real.

Sadly, the reality of this current unreality is that it is happening and is real.

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Through paid ads, social media outlets and conservative news channels, these false claims — lies, if you will — are presented as either legitimate ways of viewing reality or are dismissed as just the way Trump is and he doesn't mean what he says. There is almost no one in the current leadership of the Republican Party willing to say that

the 2020 election was legitimate or that they will unequivocally accept the results of the 2024 election.

Rather than trying to determine any factual basis for such statements, many people quickly agree, using immigrants, the federal government, and "politics" as scapegoats for their concerns and troubles. The rhetoric reinforces what they believe, and they hold even more strongly to their positions.

My political self is frustrated and angry about what is happening. In our system, one takes sides and advocates for a person or position that reflects one's values. One can usually see a partial truth in the other side. I find this difficult when the other side is articulating a reality that is not real — pure fiction. Speaking out then risks being dismissed or judged as partisan or unfair.

My contemplative and dialogical self is challenged in this difficult time. As I bring my feelings to prayer, I know that with the outcome of the election millions of people on all sides will be angry, devastated and hopeless, knowing that the next four years are in the hands of the people they so strongly disagree with. Or they will be excited and energized to bring to fruition the promises of the winning side.

The election is important, and equally important is how I and we will respond to each other in the coming days, weeks, months and years.

Trying to respond from a contemplative heart compelled by love challenges me to open myself to those with whom I differ. When I take that "long, loving look at the real," I understand that what is happening here in the U.S. is happening elsewhere in our world.

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There is a growing desire among some to have someone else tell us what to do, what is right, what is real, as one's insecurity intensifies while living in a world where change is touching every part of our lives. Not knowing what to do, many people turn to whom they see as a savior, hero or strong leader, even if that person is authoritarian or dictatorial.

The world as we have come to know it is evolving and we are caught in the transition.

To respond, I am drawn to my contemplative practice. When I can find the spaciousness within myself to see us all within that larger complex reality, I feel a release of my anger. I return to the magnetic center of Divine Love within me and draw on my core belief that we are all connected and that Divine Love dwells within each of us. I invite Divine Love to work within me to truly live Jesus' mandate to love one another as oneself.

I need to stay there for a while before I can move outward again — to sense the skillful means with which I can respond to whatever is happening in the world and in my life, compelled by Love. I know I need to spend time fostering such spaciousness. I'll need to balance expressing my emotions and not feeding the negativity that will only strengthen the differences and my anger.

I believe our tumultuous time needs those of us who follow the Gospel message of love to assume a leadership role. These next weeks, months and years will provide opportunities to share what we have experienced in "taking a long, loving look at the real" — sharing with those for whom this approach to spirituality and politics is new. Contemplation is a transformative practice, and we need to educate people about it.

Journey-Faith in an Entangled World is a book I wrote that shares reflections on contemplation and invites taking a long, loving look at the real in many aspects of our lives. It is a helpful guidebook for the challenges awaiting us after Nov. 5.

Let the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin offer us hope for the time we are in: "Savor that rich delight of being a 'citizen of the Earth.' Yes, I believe we are approaching the moment when new affinities — the true panhuman affinities — will break down nationalistic boundaries in politics as in religion. ... It is the future that is fascinating, and I see it all ablaze with God springing up everywhere" (*Teilhard de Chardin: A Book of Hours*, edited by Notre Dame Srs. Kathleen Deignan and Libby Osgood).

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.