

Inauguration Day

10:50 AM

Once again, I write while witnessing one of our nation's truly historic moments – only, unlike the infamous, terrifying spectacle we witnessed two weeks ago, this one is a spectacle of joy, love, relief, release and healing. I have just seen three past presidential couples coming out to the stands on the Capitol steps where the swearing-in of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will take place (with the notable exception of the outgoing presidential couple), and assorted members of the Supreme Court. Republican and Democratic leaders are here together; it is something to see what a friendly bond is evident between the former Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Earlier this morning Biden and his family, Harris and her family, and a handful of Republican congressional leaders (notably Mitch McConnell) attended Catholic mass together at St. Matthew the Apostle, near the Capitol. Outgoing Vice-President Mike Pence now descends the stairs with his wife. It is hard to imagine what his mindset may be this morning – but I am glad he is here, and that he survived those who would have murdered him two weeks ago, if they could have gotten their hands on him!

Vice-President Pence is announced and emerges from the doors of the Capitol to take up his place on the dais...we see that he seems to have stepped in as the acting president in the past number of days since the siege of the Capitol, although such power was never formally transferred to him.

Yesterday evening Biden and Harris, together with the Washington, D.C. Catholic archbishop, Cardinal Wilton Gregory (the first Black archbishop of Washington), presided over the first national moment of memorial and mourning for the now over 400,000 people in our nation who have died from the coronavirus during the past year. With Washington so locked-down and emptied out, the scene looking out across the National Mall – where 200,000 flags flew in honor of those whom we have lost, with the last rays of the setting sun lighting up the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial – was both solemn and stirring. And then hundreds of votive-lights lit up along the Reflecting Pool as the dusk brought on its purple tones. Finally, after four years of holding in sadness, anger, fear and

frustration, my tears began to flow...and later this morning (and at noon) I am sure they will flow again with joy and relief!

We are told that the Capitol Hill police officer, Eugene Goodman, a Black man who saved many lives two weeks ago by leading the mob of mostly white rioters away from the Senate chamber, has recently been named the acting Sargent-at-Arms amongst the Capitol Police. We see him this morning in what look like civilian clothes, but in fact he is serving as the Number 2 security official for these events today.

As he appears in the archway, ready to escort Kamala Harris to her swearing-in as our new Vice-President, and his name is announced, he receives a loud round of applause, and I hear that Officer Goodman has been nominated for a Congressional Gold Medal for his valor during that awful historical moment.

2:04

When I called my youngest brother, Jim, in Virginia, to wish him a happy New Year earlier this month, he told me “We are not celebrating the New Year until January 20th!” Indeed, today feels like, if not New Year’s Day, at least a clean new page for our nation.

After President Biden was officially sworn in, I stepped outside our front door on Walnut Street and blew several long blasts on the shofar. It felt like the right thing to do. President Biden’s speech was magnificent – the best inauguration speech that I have ever heard. But the new National Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman...she took my breath away, and opened the floodgates of my tears. This 22-year old young Black woman, with her hair up in a magnificent crown of braids encircled with a broad bright red band, and wearing a coat as yellow as the sun, delivered with such drama and exuberance a fabulous poem that combined the folksiness of rap with the loftiness of the great ideals that our nation has been struggling to meet in fits and starts for its entire history. It was evident that the poem was either very recently composed, or at least updated since the insurrection two weeks ago. Here is one small section that I managed to find online just now that refers to that frightening event:

We’ve seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it,
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.
And this effort very nearly succeeded.
But while democracy can be periodically delayed,

It can never be permanently defeated.

Mark came home from teaching a Hebrew class at his office in the temple via Zoom just in time for the presidential inauguration, joining Lev and me on the couch to watch the rituals and festivities. It was a memorable family-bonding event. At moments Lev reached out to take both of our hands. We clapped for the speakers who, of course, could not hear us, and we called out “halleluyah” together with the Rev. Silvester Beaman, the pastor of Wilmington’s Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (friends with Joe Biden since the early 1990’s), who led the final prayer at the close of the Inauguration.

[I was not able to catch all of the Rev. Beaman’s words in real time, since indeed I was praying with him, but afterwards I found these words online, which he previewed with WHYY Public Radio:

“No matter who you are, whether a descendant of the indigenous Native Americans to the people who a week before the inauguration got their citizen papers, and everybody in between — black, white, Republican, Democrat, regardless of your persuasions in life, regardless of who you voted for — we are no longer blue states or red states,” he said. “At that moment he takes office we are the United States of America.”]

Such a time of gratitude and exhilaration! We had to celebrate somehow. I fixed a homemade pizza lunch for us to share as a family.

Later, when watching President Biden and Vice President Harris and their spouses as they stood for the “military review” on the Capitol Steps, one couldn’t help but note that one of the doors to the Capitol had been left with a battered (but not broken) window, which I guessed (and then it was confirmed by a news commentator) was purposely left that way after the Capitol restoration as a reminder of that terrible day – as a reminder that we should never take democracy for granted. As I said to Mark upon seeing this, it reminded me of the Jewish tradition of *zeikher l’churban* – the “remembrance of the Destruction,” which is the principle behind breaking a glass at a Jewish wedding, or, in Jerusalem, leaving one small portion of one’s house unpainted. The idea being, that, even in our moments of greatest joy, we should not forget the suffering that has gone before, and that indeed, still remains in God’s world.

And now, as I type, the current president and vice president, and former presidential families (the Bushes, the Clintons, and the Obamas) have come to Arlington Cemetery to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This, too, reminds me of the Jewish custom of a soon-to-be bride or groom going to visit the graves of their close relatives on the day before (or the morning of) their wedding. We cannot go forward by forgetting the past. We must acknowledge it, with all its pain and sorrow, but also gathering inspiration from the sacrifices and bravery of those who

died so that we could live, so that we could be free and keep working on this project of a “more perfect union.”

Our new president has called on us all to reach out to one another, to approach those of differing opinions not with hatred but with an attempt to understand what it is like to “stand in their shoes.” I do believe it is important to look at so much of what happened under the recent administration, especially at the ways in which our democracy was imperiled (not just by the riot on Jan. 6th, but by so many ways in which the “guardrails” of democracy were overrun), and *call out* what went wrong – so that we can *establish new safeguards* for the present and future. It may be that some prosecutions are in order. And these may seem “divisive.” But just because justice is honored (by prosecuting those who have indeed committed crimes against our nation) does not mean that we cannot at the same time try to understand what caused the dis-ease that fomented some portion of our citizens’ attack on democracy. For without understanding it, it is doubtful that we will be able to heal this wound within our nation.

It feels strange to sit watching all of this so quietly within our homes (with the exception of my shofar-blasts on my front steps) apart from our neighbors. I remember the morning about one and one-half years ago when we all, in this Upper Highlands neighborhood, came out of our houses and apartments to stand at the crest of the hill on Walnut Street to watch the twin cooling stacks over in Somerset crumble on the day they were destroyed by dynamite. I remember 4th of July evenings long ago in the Boston area when I used to ride my bike down along the Charles and watch the fireworks from the MIT-side of the river, while everyone had their transistor radios or boom boxes tuned in to the same station broadcasting the Boston Pops concert that was taking place right across the river, with the cannon booms of the 1812 Overture leading up to the fireworks. Today feels as if it should be that sort of day – and yet we are each stuck in our “pods,” celebrating, if we are lucky, at least with family members or with others we might live with.

Well, it is just after 3:00 now, and the sun is shining again (it had snowed a bit this morning). I think I shall go out and walk down along the waterfront, down to the Bicentennial Park and on to the Battleship Cove, where I might see some of my fellow citizens. I would like to say “hello” to at least a few people I don’t know, and even though I might not be able to see the smiles beneath their masks, I hope to feel a new atmosphere out there in the world.

Thursday, 10:45 AM

What fickle weather! Just after I wrote the above words Lev and I bundled up and stepped out for the walk I had envisioned – but suddenly it was grey, windy and bitterly cold – and it was snowing again! We continued for a few blocks, and then turned around, came home and watched a movie.

While all that was going on, I sadly missed one event of the day that I just heard reported about later: a conversation at Arlington Cemetery between former Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama; and then later in the evening Mark and I saw snippets of the fantastic firework extravaganza that had been let loose over Washington in honor of this historic day. The camera shot of Joe and Jill Biden, silhouetted from behind with their arms around each other, viewing the fireworks from the Lincoln Balcony of the White House, just summed up my feeling of how glorious this day was...I wanted it to never end.

But we hear today that yesterday was a record-breaking one for coronavirus fatalities – the beauty and pageantry must end, and the hard work of the new Administration must begin in earnest. It is impossible to hold that frightful fact (the number of yesterday's deaths from the virus being reported by the New York Times at 4,367) and this lingering feeling of buoyancy together and have them match up with one another. But somehow, we go on, hoping for our future both near and far, for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren.

Yesterday I could not find a transcript of Amanda Gorman's poem, "The Hill We Climb" (just the few lines quoted above). But this morning, having found the full text online, I would like to quote further from this miraculous young inaugural bard's words. Here are her stirring closing lines:

So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left.

Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.

We will rise from the golden hills of the West.

We will rise from the windswept Northeast,
where our forefathers first realized revolution.

We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the Midwestern states.

We will rise from the sun-baked South.

We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.

And every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful.

When day comes, we step out of the shade,
afame and unafraid.

The new dawn balloons as we free it.

For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it.



Dawn over Buzzard's Bay, Jan. 1, 2018, from the cliffs at Briggs Beach, Little Compton, RI.