

Eternal Caucus of the Democratic Mind

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Saturday, 5:30 a.m.

I woke up because there was a lot of noise in my head. I listened to the noise for a while, and realized that I recognized the chorus from King Crimson's song "Mate Kudasai," from their 1981 album *Discipline*.

*When, when was the night so long,
Long, like the notes I'm sending.
She waits in the air,
Matte Kudasai.
She sleeps in a chair
In her sad America.*

But it sounded chaotic, because there was another song playing at the same time. It took me a while to pick out the second song. After a while, I recognized that it was "Walking on Air," another King Crimson song, from their 1995 album *THRAK**.

*And the worries of the day lie down
Under cover of the fading clouds
The secrets of the night
Come alive in your eyes
You don't have to hurry
You don't have to try
Cause you don't have a care
You're walking on air.*

"Why did you wake me up for this?" I asked whatever it was that had woken me up to hear these two songs playing simultaneously.

There wasn't any answer.

I listened to the two songs for a while.

"*They're the same song!*" said whatever it was that had woken me up.

They can't be the same song. That doesn't make any sense.

“Listen!”

So I listened. They seem to be in the same key. They both really only have two verses. They use similar lyrical imagery, and convey similar low-key, pensive moods. They even both mention someone in the air — in one song, waiting in air, and in the other song, walking on air. Their melodies aren’t very similar, though.

I found myself arguing. The second song has a bridge, I said. It’s completely different.

*“That’s not a bridge. How can it be a bridge**, if there are only two choruses?”*

Why am I awake? Why the hell did you wake me up to hear this?

“They’re the same song!”

Look, Adrian Belew just didn’t think up a very original set of lyrics or melodies for the slow, cool-down song on *THRAK*, that’s all, and he accidentally made a song similar to “Matte Kudasai.” That’s all it is. Couldn’t you have written this down on a post-it note or something, so I could read it when I woke up?

“I don’t have any hands.”

OK, I concede the point. But again, why did you wake me up?

“I didn’t want you to forget this. Why don’t you listen to all the other King Crimson albums so I can analyze them?”

Now?

“Yes, now.”

I don’t have all the albums.

There was a long pause.

“Why don’t you buy them? You can get them on eBay.”

I know I can get them on eBay. But I just bought you *Shin Godzilla*! I’ve bought you enough!

“That was several weeks ago.”

Two weeks!

“Almost a month. You’re stingy.”

I’m frugal! That’s a good thing! And you just made me buy you that book on screenwriting! It’s not even here yet. And you still haven’t finished that Japanese novel, and it’s really short! You said you wanted to work on a screenplay! And now you need to do some kind of musicology project involving all of King Crimson’s albums?

There was another long pause.

“You’re mean.”

You’ve got no discipline!

“Yes, I do. I was just listening to the album.”

Why do you have to take everything so literally? Is this really why you woke me up?

There was yet another long pause.

“When can we have coffee again?”

You know I only let you have coffee with breakfast. You can only have it before noon. And then you can only have two shots of espresso, or two cups of regular coffee, tops. And no more caffeine at all for the rest of the day. I made an exception this week and let you have three shots of espresso every morning, because we stayed up so late reading about the Iowa caucus all week, and so were really short on sleep... oh.

“What?”

Never mind. Look, we’re going back to two shots or two cups a day next week, okay?

*“I’m going to loop ‘Vroom Vroom’*** in your head at top volume!”*

No, you aren’t. If you do, we’re going cold turkey.

“You’re really mean.”

Yes. I’m mean. Now good night! I said, with some force, inside my head. I didn’t get an answer.

I tried for a while to get back to sleep, but then realized I wasn’t going to be able to get back to sleep until I wrote down this whole exchange. Which I did. After I typed up the first draft, I put my laptop away and tried to get back to sleep. Elanor started crying in her bedroom, and then I heard Sam making noise in the kitchen. I went out to investigate. He was making himself hot cocoa at 5:30 in the morning. Apparently the yelling in my head had woken them up, too.

*If you want to hear something like the noise in my head that woke me up, you can play both songs at once using the YouTube Multiplier web site.

**You can find an unofficial video for “Walking on Air” here (King Crimson doesn’t have “official” videos). There are different ways you could interpret the structure of the song. You might think of it as a first verse, or a set of three verses, and then a very short chorus (version 1), “Then we’ll both surrender there / Walking on air,” then a second verse, or second set of three verses, the same length or lengths as the first but with a very different melody or melodies, followed by another very short chorus (version 2), “Cause you don’t have a care / You’re walking on air.” But that’s not the only way to think of it. In particular, what happens after the instrumental break is open to interpretation.

The six lines before the first chorus have a much different melody and feel than the six lines before the second chorus. They *feel* a bit like a bridge sounds and feels, a variation before returning to the repeating structure, although in a pop song a bridge usually fits in after two (or more) similar verse/chorus structures, taking the song on a slight detour to change the mood, which in turn changes the way the final verse/chorus structure *feels* in the altered context. Can you legitimately call those six lines a “bridge” when there has only been one verse/chorus structure before it? I don’t know. But whichever hemisphere of my brain was awake and arguing with the other one at 5 a.m. thought so. If you want to compare “Walking on Air” to “Matte Kudasai,” you can find a video for “Matte Kudasai” [here](#). That song’s structure is less ambiguous: aside from the instrumental sections, it just has a verse/chorus, verse/chorus structure.

***This is “Vroom Vroom”. I saw King Crimson play it in Minneapolis in 1995. I think my ears are still ringing, even though I wore earplugs.

The Week Before Last

I didn’t manage to write anything up for the newsletter last week, but I had a lot to talk about. So even though, after last week’s political nightmares, the week before last feels like it happened about eighteen months ago, I’ll try to remember what I wanted to talk about.

I got in touch with the TinyLetter support staff to ask them how I could make styled text work the way I wanted it to. This is important in newsletters where I include C code. The program I use to convert from Markdown to HTML, called Pandoc, has the ability to apply very nice syntax highlighting to text in different programming languages, including C. But TinyLetter will strip these styles out of the HTML that I paste into its editor, replacing the style definitions completely with its own set of standard styles. I’ll spare you the gory details, involving CSS; I really don’t know that much about how CSS works and how to make it do what I want, since the last time I was paid to develop web sites, things were much different. But I wanted to see if there was a way to make TinyLetter do things the way I wanted it to.

It seems that there isn’t a way. The best they could do was to tell me that they thought I might be able to make it work with Mailchimp, their platform for bigger mailing lists. But they wouldn’t actually tell me that it would work for certain. So for now I’m going to stick with what TinyLetter can do. If I write more long articles including code, I might put a properly-formatted HTML version on my web site and link to it from the newsletter, so that you can read it with the formatting I intended it to have, if you want to. Pandoc can also apply this formatting to other destination formats, so it should look nice if I ever published these newsletters in some kind of print form.

Still Sick

I continued to be low-key sick that whole week, slightly feverish, with a bit of coughing and wheezing. This sort of thing has happened to me before in recent years, and I've gone to doctors just to check that I'm not developing pneumonia, because I don't want to go out of this world like the late and much-missed Jim Henson. I even got a chest x-ray a few years ago. It was clear. So as far as I can tell, it is just some combination of winter allergies and probably the remnants of a lingering sinus infection. I know that when the winter temperatures are constantly bouncing around, freezing and thawing, allergens will come back and the rapid changes in humidity will mess with my lungs and throat and sinuses, a lot. It isn't really advisable to take Flonase year-round; usually, after the first hard freeze at the start of winter, folks don't have to. But here I am, using it in February. I also know that if I can get a couple of really good nights of sleep in a row, or get an afternoon to drink hot tea and nap, I will start to feel quite a bit better. But that is quite hard to achieve in our household. I kept trying to go to bed early, but going to bed early when the kids haven't, and won't, settled down, doesn't mean I can actually get any extra sleep, or even rest.

Normally I wouldn't have to stay on Flonase into *February*, but these aren't normal times. In our corner of Michigan, we've had a temperature anomaly of about +5 degrees Fahrenheit for all of December and January. And I just saw this article. It says:

Across the contiguous U.S., this winter so far is running about 4.5°F warmer than the average winter of the 20th century.

I don't know what kind of play this is getting in mainstream media sources, but it is pretty terrifying. I'm not sure if people really understand what this kind of change portends for our regional hydrology, for our food crops, for the insect populations, for wildlife, for communicable diseases, and for our infrastructure. But none of it is good. For one thing, we have the problem that warmer temperatures bring more severe snowstorms. In fact, we're under a weather advisory now, telling me that we might get 2 to 3 inches of snow accumulating very quickly this afternoon. But it's not going to stay below freezing today or for the next few days, so it's going to be a mess. And this has been the pattern this whole winter, which has been a winter barely worthy of the name.

You also might have heard about the record high temperature measured in the Antarctic region — 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

Weathering with You (2019 Film)

I had been aware that there was going to be a limited run of the subtitled, not dubbed, animated Japanese film *Weathering with You*, and that it would be showing at the theater on Carpenter Road just a few miles from our home. But I had lost track of exactly when that was happening. The Thursday before last, it occurred to me that I should check again, and I discovered that it was playing

later that night — and that was the last showing of its run. So I got into a text message conversation with Grace and told her that I wanted to take her and a couple of the kids to the showing, even though it started at 10:55 p.m. A few years ago, I took the gang to see *Your Name*, another animated film by the same director, also screened with subtitles, and the kids loved that film, even though it was difficult for some of the younger ones to keep up with the subtitles. So she was enthusiastic to see this one, even though it would be so late.

Weathering with You is “cli-fi” (climate fiction), an anime film that fits somewhere into the magical-realism side of the genre, just as *Your Name* did. A young student named Hodaka runs away from his home on a remote island to seek his fortune in Tokyo. In Tokyo, he finds that his savings are quickly eaten up by the high cost of living, and he becomes homeless, living on the street. The Tokyo street scenes are gorgeous, influenced by Syd Mead’s work in *Blade Runner* and also by the granddaddy of international anime hits, *Akira*. But while all this is taking place, Tokyo is experiencing an unprecedented stretch of rain. The rainy skies and streets are so large an element of the film that they take on the importance of a character. The drawing and animation of rain and sun is just gorgeous in this film, which is one of the reasons I felt that it was especially important to see it in the theater instead of on a small screen at home.

Hodaka meets up with a girl named Hina, who he thinks is a few years older than he is; she isn’t, really, but his perception of her is important in defining their relationship. She is living with her younger brother Nagisi, who is comically wise beyond his years; Hodaka goes to him for advice on relationships, and starts to refer to him as “sensei” (master). The three young people form the core group of characters in the film, although there are several other interesting characters.

Hina is a “sunshine girl” — we learn that she can actually pray for good weather, and the unceasing rain will stop, and a hole will open up in the clouds, letting gorgeous beams of sunshine through. But the effect only covers a small area, and only lasts for a few hours. But in gloomy, wet Tokyo, people are desperate, and so the trio forms a small business renting out the sunshine girl’s services for pay, to keep them afloat in Tokyo.

Weathering with You is really a film portraying the director’s vision of how the next generations might come to terms with catastrophic climate change. Because the rains afflicting Tokyo don’t stop. In this regard, I feel that it is a mixed bag. I think one of the underlying messages, that individuals can’t solve anything by burying themselves in personal guilt for climate change, is spot-on. But another underlying message seems to be completely fatalistic — we aren’t going to make any of the changes that it would take to reverse or even ameliorate the effects. And it completely misses the fact that the temperature trajectory we’re on is one that leads, unchecked, not to inconvenience and adaptation, but to the collapse of all the systems that we rely on, and it doesn’t lead there slowly.

Maybe it’s asking too much of an animated film to ask it to go *there*. But I still think of it as something of a missed opportunity, and I remain disappointed that

it let a fatalistic neoliberal world view damage its honesty.

Artistically, it's a fantastic movie, although I'm not sure it is quite as good as *Your Name*. There are some weaknesses in the presentation of the story — for example, Hokada's back-story is almost completely absent, which is so glaring that it seems like there might have been scenes that were either censored or cut to reduce the run time. But overlooking that, it's practically a flawless piece of visual storytelling, reminiscent of some of my other favorite anime films such as *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013). There is just so much going on in the depiction of rainy Tokyo and how it influences, and is influenced *by*, the characters' moods.

At one point in the film, Hodaka is running to save Hina, and he runs past a sign painted on a building that reads "Lumine Est." Apparently it's a shopping center, a real place. I think this literally means "light is," or "there is light," but in context I take it to mean the city is telling Hodaka that he holds the light inside him. The film, although largely a romantic comedy, goes to some dark, and occasionally more than a little melodramatic, places. Hodaka and Hina are separated. When they are reunited, three years later, rain is still pouring down onto a flooded Tokyo. It is overcast and gloomy. As they run to greet each other, their faces are brilliantly illuminated. But the sun hasn't come out. We realize with some surprise that Hodaka and Hina are, both, shining lights to one another.

***Porgy and Bess* (Metropolitan Operal live stream), and Diverse Anniversaries**

These notes are a revised version of a post I wrote on Facebook.

On February first, Grace and I went out to celebrate her birthday by going to see the Met live stream of *Porgy and Bess*. It was beautiful and featured amazing performances.

Porgy and Bess is hard to love unreservedly. It's an all-black opera (and pretty much the only one, or at least the only well-known one), originally written in dialect by white writers. So in the written libretto, Porgy sings:

*No, no, brudder, Porgy ain't sof' on no woman;
They pass by singin', they pass by cryin',
always lookin'.
They look in my do' an' they keep on movin'.
When Gawd make cripple,
He mean him to be lonely.
Night time, day time,
He got to trabble dat lonesome road.
Night time, day time,
He got to trabble dat lonesome road.*

This is supposed to represent a version of the Gullah dialect, although its accuracy is disputed. It used to be commonplace for white writers to represent

black speech like this. In the subtitles, fortunately, the Metropolitan Opera has turned the spellings into standard spellings, which gets rid of some of the the condescension that a modern reader feels when reading it.

The story is melodramatic and heavy-handed, with foreshadowing that was probably considered sophisticated at the time but now feels occasionally laughable. When one of the characters leaves on his fishing boat, he sings about heading for the promised land, and I wanted to mutter “dead man rowing!” When a character talks about how the weather couldn’t possibly be that dangerous, because she hadn’t heard the “hurricane bell” ring in years, I turned to Grace and murmured “bell in three, two, one,” and there it was, right on cue.

The characters are pretty simplistic and mostly represent stereotypes (or, interpreted in a more positive way, archetypes), and it’s loaded with scenes that say “yeah, they may be poor, but look how happy they are,” and so seems pretty apologetic for Jim Crow segregation. But many of the characters are also so iconic and charismatic that it’s hard to stay mad about them. Some of the songs are really beautiful. Most people have probably heard “Summertime,” but there are other moments, less suited to be remembered as stand-alone songs, but gorgeous in context. And some of the characters transcend the boundaries placed on them, especially Bess. The cast did a great job of making some of the relatively two-dimensional characters a little more complex, sympathetic, and three-dimensional.

The staging, on a revolving, open set that looks a bit like a giant dollhouse with the walls removed, was very effectively done. As the opera opens, on a scrim we see an image of an abandoned, boarded-up building. It appears as if we are traveling back in time, then, to enter that world when it was alive and overflowing with people singing out their joys, sorrows, and pains.

At the start of the opera, the manager of the Met came out onto the stage to tell the audience that Eric Owens (Porgy) had a bad cold, but he was going to soldier on. They must have given him a shot of B-12 and chicken soup, or something, because while he did look a bit pale and sweaty in some scenes, he still did a great job. And the other leads, Denyce Graves (Maria) and Angel Blue (Bess), knocked it out of the park, and completely deserve the accolades they’ve been getting for their fantastic performances.

I’m glad we got to see it.

The next day, February second, was the twentieth anniversary of the day Grace and I first met in person. We had exchanged e-mails a few times, after connecting on Yahoo Personals, but February 2nd, 2000 was our first date. I joked to Grace that via Yahoo Personals, I met my own personal yahoo.

We met at the Eastern Accents café and bakery in downtown Ann Arbor (sadly closed now, and I still miss that place!). She was dressed elegantly, for business. I had recently shaved my head and dyed the stubble red, and was wearing a t-shirt with a picture of a giant sea turtle. We were clearly extremely mismatched. But

we stayed until closing, just talking and talking and talking. And we haven't really stopped since.

Last Week

I have been quite distracted by the Iowa Caucuses. "Distracted" may not be a strong enough word. "Fixated" might not be a strong enough word. I'm not even sure if "obsessed" is a strong enough word. Grace has been warning me that she might need to stage an intervention. So I'm going to save that topic for last, because if I start writing about it now, I probably won't have time to talk about anything else.

Things have been a bit strange at work. There is now a real, professionally-designed and manufactured printed circuit board to replace the printed circuit boards that I designed and ordered and then built by hand or had our technician build. So that's really cool to see; the project will soon be a real product. But we are relying on a team in China to write the Windows graphical user interface program that will control this product, and things in China aren't going well. The Thorlabs office there has been closed and the staff locked out, and I think this will continue for at least another week, and possibly longer. So I've been put in the position of trying to exhort those staff members to work on my project from home, even though they don't have access to the prototype hardware, and even though they are now experiencing conditions that are probably pretty dire and strange. They tell me that they are all healthy, but I can't help but wonder about their friends and family and morale.

My health has improved some since last week, and it was a reasonably productive work week for me, despite the rage and despair about electoral politics. The renovations happening in my office building are mostly complete. I had to move my desk, though, for the third time since last summer. I will no longer have an office with a door, but I will have a nice space, with windows on two sides. It's actually the space I asked for initially when my boss and I spoke about the renovations last summer. So I'm planning to bring in some plant stands and customize it a bit.

Yesterday (Saturday the 8th), my son Joshua (age eleven) was an altar server at Mass for the first time.

***Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone* (2009 North American release of the 2007 Japanese film)**

Back in the nineties, I was a fan of the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. I rented the episodes on VHS tape. The show is in the news again because Netflix has been streaming it. Unfortunately in 2020 there is still no North American Blu-ray version available. You have to find an old DVD set on eBay, or pay upwards of a thousand dollars for a Japanese set that isn't subtitled or dubbed. Or you can buy a bootleg edition, and there are lots of those.

But there's another option. A few years ago, the creator of the series, Hideaki Anno, who was also one of the people who created *Shin Godzilla*, started to release a new series of films, known collectively in North America as the "Rebuild of Evangelion" series. There will be four films. They condense and retell the story of the original series, although I think the later ones also diverge from it. They aren't just edited versions of the series; everything is redrawn, although some of the scenes follow scenes in the original exactly, shot-for-shot. And they introduce 2-D and 3-D computer graphics into some scenes.

Wikipedia says:

"The film tetralogy uses 3D CG animation, and provides new scenes, settings and characters, with a completely new conclusion in the fourth film." Another stated intention of the series is for it to be more accessible to non-fans than the original TV series and films were.

Anyway, the first film is called *Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone* and while the Blu-ray is out of print, copies are readily available on eBay. So we watched it. I'm not sure I agree that they succeeded in making the show "more accessible to non-fans," except in the sense that it requires less of a time commitment to watch a film than it does to watch the first six episodes of the original series. The film moves fast, though, and it is fairly confusing. I found it confusing even having watched the original, although not for over twenty years. So we had to read some plot summaries. It's sure gorgeous and terrifying, though, although perhaps a little too intense for some of the kids; Joshua reports that it scared him. But he still wanted to watch it again.

The Evangelion story is complicated and weird. It is a take on the old "mecha" (giant robot) genre, but a very strange one. Per Wikipedia:

Evangelion is set fifteen years after a worldwide cataclysm, particularly in the futuristic fortified city of Tokyo-3. The protagonist is Shinji, a teenage boy who was recruited by his father Gendo to the shadowy organization NERV to pilot a giant bio-machine mecha called an "Evangelion" into combat with alien beings called "Angels." The series explores the experiences and emotions of Evangelion pilots and members of NERV as they try to prevent any and all of the Angels from causing another cataclysm, and as they deal with the quest of finding out the real truth behind events and organizational moves. The series features imagery derived from Kabbalah, Christianity, and Judaism.

It's definitely not for everyone. But the real strength of the show is the way it contrasts the huge, cataclysmic fight scenes with the personal stories of the small, frail, young humans who pilot them.

***Becoming Superman* by J. Michael Straczynski (Unabridged Audiobook)**

I'm a little leery of biographies and autobiographies, because I often find them either unbearably dull or unbearably self-absorbed. J. Michael Straczynski is the guy behind the *Babylon 5* television series. But he's also written an awful lot more than that, ranging from the children's animated shows *He-Man* and *the Masters of the Universe* and *The Real Ghostbusters* to a number of comics including *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Superman*, other television shows including *Murder, She Wrote*, and some major screenplays including the first Marvel *Thor* film. He's also got a long history on social media dating back to the days long before it was called "social media." Currently he makes himself quite accessible to fans on Twitter and I've had (extremely brief) conversations with him a few times. This book is his autobiography, but as you might imagine from his history as a writer, it's bigger and more interesting than his own story. It's an autobiography that pulls in a lot of other people.

Last Christmastime, I wanted to get myself a copy of the printed edition, but I wasn't sure that I would actually read it. So I looked up the audiobook. I was excited to find out that there was an unabridged version available on CD, and that it was read by Peter Jurasik. Jurasik played Londo in *Babylon 5* and he has quite a distinctive, gruff voice. Unfortunately I could not find a copy in stock anywhere locally, and Nicola's Books could not even get a copy from their distributor in time for Christmas. So I made a mental note to order a copy later. I did, and it arrived last weekend.

I like to listen to books like this as audiobooks, in CD format, because I can play them in the car during my commute, and also listen to them on headphones while I'm working. So over the course of the week I listened to all thirteen discs, finishing it up yesterday.

Straczynski's story is remarkable, and it has moved and inspired me to rethink aspects of my own life. He grew up in impoverished circumstances, raised by a violently abusive alcoholic father. Many events he portrays are absolutely horrifying. If you have a tendency to be re-traumatized by accounts of abuse, you might want to skip this one. My own memories of abuse at the hands of a stepfather who was angry and embittered and, we eventually learned, suffering from dementia, are not nearly as horrifying as Straczynski's, but we have enough in common that his story gave me disturbing flashbacks and made me remember scenes from my childhood that I had buried and not recalled or thought about in decades. It's given me a lot to think about, in terms of the process I am still undergoing, trying to figure out how to be the best parent I can, and firmly and unconditionally renounce some of the tactics that were used to raise me. Straczynski's unwavering dedication to that cause, the cause of never being a one of the "hurt people" who "hurts people," has shown me that I need to redouble my efforts to transmute my personal history into something better. Straczynski talks at length about how he has channeled many aspects of his own story into

his writing, and the most personal stories often became his most successful work.

We learn over the course of the book that not only was Straczynski's father a psychopath at home, but he was literally a Nazi war criminal who engaged in the mass murder of Jews. Straczynski only came to learn the truth of all this recently. Early on in the book, he describes bringing a Jewish girl to his house, and how she stopped cold when she saw his father's display of Nazi memorabilia.

I tweeted to Straczynski, quoting his book at him:

“Did I not mention the Nazi paraphernalia before now? Oh.”

Good Lord, @straczynski!!!

And he wrote back:

Funny book, eh?

Yes. Yes, it is. But it's much more than that. In one of the most touching parts of the book is the Straczynski tells the story of Michael O'Hare, who played Commander Jeffrey Sinclair in the first season of *Babylon 5*, but disappeared rather abruptly from the show, only appearing again briefly as a guest star to clarify what became of him.

O'Hare suffered from severe mental illness, showing symptoms that think point to schizophrenia. When Straczynski had to ask him to leave the show, he promised O'Hare that he would take his secret “to his grave.” But O'Hare asked him, instead, to take the secret to *his* grave, telling him that he wanted the world to know his story after he died, and hoped that his story would help people understand that mental illness can strike anyone. And so after O'Hare's death in 2012, Straczynski began to tell his story in public, initially discussing it at a convention. In this book we learn a bit more. We also learn more about the circumstances of the deaths of three more cast members, and their sad stories are also a lot to take in. And as Straczynski was a fan, and then a friend, of Harlan Ellison, we read about how Straczynski said goodbye to him, as well.

As I am not usually a fan of the genre, I haven't read all that many autobiographies. But I'm going to go out on a limb and say that this is the best one I have read, and likely the best one I ever will read. It's fascinating. If you can tolerate audiobooks, and I know that not everyone likes them, get the audiobook, because Peter Jurasik's reading is pretty great, too.

The Unbearable Caucacity of Being; or, How I Spent a Year in the Caucuses Last Week

I started following the caucus returns on Monday night. It quickly became clear that it was going to take a while to see the finished results, so I poured myself a glass of port and sipped it while I waited.

I'm still waiting.

They are lying to you. They are lying to you a lot.

On Pete Buttigieg's web site, it says "The results are in! We won the Iowa caucus!" And on CNN, if you look, it says that they have data from 100% of precincts. But that isn't true. There is still a small percentage of caucus data unreported, and it's important to keep in mind that the percentage of precincts doesn't match the percentage of voters involved, because most of the caucuses are quite small, in rural areas.

The Media Fix is In

I knew some shit was gonna go down when, Monday morning, I turned on an NPR talk show and heard a panel discussion about the caucuses. It wasn't very informative. All the panelists were actually trying to discredit the caucuses, to explain to us why we shouldn't have any faith in the results, and why Iowa shouldn't get to go first. Some of the reasons were reasonable, but some were identity politics talking points, about how Iowa is too white to represent America any more. Several were also saying that Iowans of color, and working-class Iowans, had a hard time getting time off work to go to a caucus.

Now, it's true that the caucus process takes longer than voting in an election. But no one said "well, that's also true of elections; we should make election day a Federal holiday." It's true that the demographics of Iowa don't resemble the demographics of most of America. But all this had a weird feel to it. Not one of the panelists was willing to stand up and say "if Iowans want to get rid of their caucus, they are free to do so." No one pointed out that caucuses are more transparent than elections. No one pointed out that caucuses helped build community and build consensus and serve as an opportunity for neighbors to build political solidarity. I've found that liberal Democrats actually *hate* people of different classes building political solidarity; it threatens their notions of meritocracy, credentialism, and hierarchy, including the idea that the professional-managerial class deserves to maintain its power.

Later in the day I found that the Washington Post had run four different editorials criticizing the Iowa caucuses, explaining why they were worthless, why we shouldn't put any faith in them, and why Iowa should have its first-in-line status taken away. I was reminded of 2016 when they ran sixteen different editorials criticizing Sanders in sixteen hours. In at least one case, a pundit who had just a few months earlier defended the caucus, writing about how important it was, argued exactly the opposite. Perhaps they should change the slogan on their masthead to "Democracy Drowns in Bullshit."

There are lots of valid reasons to criticize the caucuses and the way they are implemented — the whole primary process, really. But no one was standing up for ranked choice voting. No one was standing up for paper ballots and getting unaccountable electronic devices out of the election process. No one was standing up for transparency or making voting (or caucusing) easier for everyone. And it wasn't just in NPR and the Washington Post — it was everywhere.

It felt a bit like if, on the morning before the Superbowl, all the sports news outlets started running pieces about how the NFL is racist and therefore, the Superbowl isn't a valid way to compare the quality of football teams, and so we should ignore the outcome – except this isn't a game.

Conspiracies “R” Me

I've tried, at every stage here, to avoid sinking into conspiratorial thinking. I would like to have faith in our institutions. For one thing, life is simply a lot easier when we have that faith; it's like having a north star to guide us. But of course, that's one of the ways they get you to ignore the failure of these institutions; life is more comfortable if you believe that good people are running things, competently and ethically, and we live in the best of all *possible* worlds, because what's *possible* just happens to entirely align with the interests of the PMC.

Actually *seeing* the rot, if you're in in the PMC or even adjacent to it at all, is kind of like any other class consciousness — it's fleeting. We tend to return to solidarity with our own class, unless we constantly push ourselves out of that comfort zone. It's easier *not* to see the rot. Not seeing the rot allows you to exist more easily in the workplace. Not seeing the rot allows you to more easily network, and schmooze. Having been raised in a sort of meandering no-man's-land between working class, middle class, and PMC, though, and taught solidarity as an expression of my family's faith, I feel compelled to dig up the rot. And one of the reasons I feel compelled to dig up the rot is that the people and institutions, like The Washington “Democracy Dies in Darkness” Post, who are supposed to be doing this work for us, simply aren't doing it; they're serving other masters.

There was a poll scheduled, but the Buttigieg campaign spiked it. The polls immediately before a caucus or election day are the gold standard in polling data. The Buttigieg campaign claimed that one poll worker had changed the font size in a window, and then because the window didn't show all the questions that the poll worker was supposed to ask, one person was given a poll that left off a question about Buttigieg. On that basis, they claimed, the poll should be spiked. Presumably they threatened to bury the Des Moines Register under an avalanche of expensive lawsuits, and bankrupt them, if they released it.

Data trickled out very slowly. Initially this was blamed on an app which had been introduced into the process at the last minute. But there was also failure to provide an adequate backup system. I watched this play out in real-time on Twitter with Iowa caucus captains, who over the course of several days, reported their data, but then didn't see it appear in the official counts for 24 hours or longer.

Between the polls and the reporting failures the part had, essentially, spiked not just the poll, but the whole caucus, as Chapo Trap House put it. They robbed the front-runner of the chance to carry the momentum of a clear victory in Iowa.

And they robbed us all of the chance to compare the results against the final poll, as a sanity check.

Quality Control

We were told that the delays were due to “quality control.” But the alleged quality control didn’t seem to result in much quality. I watched the numerous errors in the reported data caught in real time. I watched caucus-watchers start to collaborate with each other using Google documents, and sharing their results with the Sanders campaign, which recorded a lot of its own results. I watched them report the errors to the Iowa Democratic Party and then watched their frustration as over the course of the next few days, those errors were not corrected. And some of them were awfully big errors, like giving Sanders’ alignment numbers to Tom Steyer, who was not, according to the numbers, even considered “viable.” (An easy mistake to make, right? After all, they are both Jewish and their last names both start with “S.”)

If you want to read up a bit on the errors, head over to, of all places, Popular Mechanics. Over the course of the past week I watched the IDC cherry-pick and release the data from caucuses that supported Buttigieg first, without correcting obvious errors, and withholding the data from more populous precincts, which tended to lean to Sanders, long after the caucus chairs had phoned it in.

Initially I tried to tell myself that the issues with the caucus were mostly just data-reporting issues. And it’s true, there are data-reporting issues. A lot of the issues had to do with trying to an untrustworthy app into the process. So I will talk about the role of unaccountable electronic devices in elections, below.

Hoping to maintain a scrap of faith in the institutions, I wanted to believe that these errors were due to a lack of staffing to handle the manual recording of reports from the caucuses, after the failure of the automated systems. But I’m no longer able to convince myself that this was the reason. I have tried to convince myself that the IDC’s failure to correct errors that have been reported to them numerous times, including by the campaigns, was just due to incompetence, but I can’t convince myself of that any longer.

The Associated Press and the New York Times took a look at these errors and have reported that these errors make the actual race impossible to call. That was the goal of the anti-Sanders PMC. Remember how on Monday morning the media was lining up to undermine our faith in the *relevance* of the Iowa caucuses? Well, the Democratic Party wanted to make sure that we wouldn’t be able to put any confidence in the *results* of the caucuses, either.

Lies, Damned Lies, and Caucus Results

The New York Times reported that, in examining their sample, the errors in the reported data didn’t seem to favor one candidate or another in particular, and I thought that might be true. But I’ve watched that argument dismantled

on Twitter by people who did the math. I've watched my centrist and liberal friends defend Tom Perez and Troy Price, but looking into their actions, and their blatantly partisan behavior, I find that I can't defend the indefensible.

I must stop short of saying that there was actual tampering with the caucus results, because I haven't seen convincing evidence of this. I strongly suspect that many precinct captains played a bit fast and loose with the numbers, in order to hand an extra delegate or two here or there to the Buttigieg campaign, under cover of bad rounding. I'm not entirely sure why they did this, though; why cheat retail, when you can cheat wholesale?

The DNC and IDC are taking the position now that caucus worksheets with obvious errors, such as rounding errors that resulted in the wrong number of delegates being assigned to candidates, or delegate assignments determined by coin flips when they shouldn't have been, can't be corrected, because the signed worksheets are legal documents. Unfortunately, I find myself having to agree with that position, although I believe a process is possible by which a caucus chair could be asked to invalidate an incorrect worksheet and sign a corrected one.

There was an opportunity for a candidate to request a recanvass or a recount, and Perez himself has suggested that a recanvass is needed, throwing further doubt on the integrity of the results.

The Real Tampering

The blatant tampering wasn't necessarily with the precinct *results* themselves, but with the *reporting* of these results. Buttigieg claimed, with zero percent of the precincts reporting, that he had won. Just today, Sunday, the IDC released updated numbers. They seem to have selectively applied corrections to reported errors that improved Buttigieg's lead, while not correcting errors that disadvantaged Sanders.

There are still a large number of uncorrected errors. It's not clear if they will ever be corrected. Allegedly, we will have more numbers updated by noon tomorrow. But there's a primary on Tuesday, and people's minds have moved on. It is one of my personality defects, but I can't feel settled and OK with that.

Iowa isn't so much about the actual number of delegates — that number isn't that high. Iowa is about the *narrative*. And the narrative isn't trustworthy, nor are the people creating it. The narrative was stolen.

Apparently, Nevada is going to use a different app to run their caucuses. That's great for Nevada.

Speaking Ex Cathedra

I've had some interesting discussions this week with Iowa Caucus chairs. One of them wrote on Twitter:

I, as an Iowan, think that this childish display, disrespect towards the IDP leadership who are doing everything to prove accuracy, really deserves accuracy. If you disagree, roll on by.

(The IDP is the Iowa Democratic Party.) Her comment, by the way, was in response to criticism of a statement by Troy Price.

I responded to her, writing:

At this point, the onus is clearly on Iowa to demonstrate why the people who screwed this up so badly should ever be allowed to hold any position of public trust again. We aren't gonna just take your word on this and I'm not the least apologetic about that.

She replied:

Did I ask you to apologize? I don't give a fuck what you think! If your super human selves in MI can run a Caucus/Primary with absolute accuracy, that's great, but you're criticizing real people, that's just cruel.

I replied again:

Real people who fail at their jobs, in any other field, lose their jobs. It's clear that we have taken our election and/or caucus integrity for granted FAR too long, not just in Iowa but in Michigan and every state. You folks are in the hot seat, but there will be more hot seats!

She answered:

That's probably true

I continued:

I think IA is under extra criticism because your system is at least somewhat transparent compared to most elections. We can see your mistakes. But maybe in 2020 more people will realize that in their states, there is no transparency, so no assurances at all, and that's *bad*.

She replied:

Yes, it is bad. I think Iowa is the national whipping boy right now. We have the most people from the press that I've ever seen before. It's been like that for almost a year. When @BetoORourke announced his candidacy here, he was mobbed by the press the entire time he was in IA.

Unaccountable Electronics in Elections

I have been writing code since 1977. I have developed programs ranging from firmware for FDA-regulated medical devices to applications for Mac, Windows,

and iOS, and many devices you likely haven't heard of. I've developed web sites, and back-ends for web sites, including back ends that talk to large databases.

Election data should *never* be entrusted to computers running closed-source, un-reviewable, un-auditable code. And certainly not to Microsoft or Apple operating systems.

If you want to use PowerPoint to present your tables of results, or whatever, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about your votes, or caucus alignment numbers. If you don't have a complete paper trail with a clearly signed and sealed chain of custody in an election, you have nothing trustworthy at all.

In most elections, it's not really clear if we *do* have anything trustworthy at all. Several states still allow all-electronic voting, and it's still a disaster.

The Paper Chase

The Iowa Caucuses, oddly enough, for all their problems, still seem to use a fairly transparent paper trail. This is actually a great thing. But it's been an embarrassing thing for the Iowans, because we've been able to see just how many errors they make. I spent quite a bit of time this week looking at numbers and cell phone photos of caucus data-entry worksheets.

A lot of the buzz is about how awful and convoluted the system is. But having looked into how it is supposed to work in practice, I have found that it is actually an extremely fair system, to allocate integral numbers of delegates to competing factions in a caucus location, on-site. It requires only a basic four-function calculator, middle-school math skills (there isn't any algebra involved), and of course a bit of training and practice and care.

If you have recorded and transmitted numbers by computer and there isn't that paper trail, and you don't know, or can't prove, who has handled the pieces of paper, your election, or caucus, or whatever, doesn't meet the most basic and widely accepted international norms for election data integrity.

Remember that app, that was introduced into the process at the last minute?

We Know What to Do, but We Won't Do It

We know how to do this and what is required. We have spent a lot of effort studying the problem and we hold other countries to high standards. You can see some guidelines here if this subject is new to you.

Now, because we know how to do it securely, when we don't, the only *safe* conclusions one can logically reach, when things like untested apps are introduced, are these:

- The change has been introduced to compromise the election, or

- The change has been introduced to make it impossible to verify that the election was not compromised.

That's it.

These changes can make it impossible to reconstruct that all-important audit trail and chain of custody that proves just *how* the individual, secured piece of data representing the vote or caucus choice was counted, and then aggregated into larger results, and transmitted. If that can no longer be done, we can't call it an election any longer.

We should call it an act of treason.

Banana Republic

And while we're at it, we'd better stop claiming that we are even a *minimally* functional Democracy instead of a kleptocracy. We're a Banana Republic, but with better Internet.

For much of my life the general consense around me was that the politicians with "R" in front of their names were the corrupt ones, and the ones with "D" in front of their names might be sociopaths, or elitists, but at least they tried to hold clean elections.

That hasn't actually been true for a long time, if indeed it ever was true. Historically, the Democratic party has run *famously* fraudulent elections. And recent history demonstrates the utter lack of accountability of the DNC.

In fact, at present I don't think Republicans even *need* to run dirty elections, since Fox News has been so successful at consolidating Republican identity as an aggrieved, persecuted minority, and so they fall in line on Election Day far more religiously than they practice religion.

What Needs to Happen Next

This caucus, and the entirely corrupted caucuses and elections which will come after it, should by all rights spell the collapse of the Democratic Party as it is currently constituted. The failure of one of the two major parties, and the rise of a third party, which deflates and eventually renders vestigial the party it split from, has happened before. In fact, it is a normal, cyclical event in American history. That isn't to say that when it happens, it doesn't bring with it a lot of chaos and anxiety — of course it does. But it must happen now.

And I think it needs to happen like this: we need to take back the party. We, the left. If the useless right wing of the Democratic party won't bend the knee to the rational center-left, embodied by Sanders and his burgeoning new coalition, they will be marginalized completely within their own party. They will leave us, if we don't leave them.

The structure of our system just doesn't allow for the long-term survival of a third party at present. So most right-wing Democrats will join the Republican party, which is better aligned with their actual values. Their departure would do so much good. It might allow the party to shift from its current role, representing the interests of the PMC, back towards its historic role, or at least what it claims is its historic role — representing the interests of working people.

Democrats that won't join the old-new thing, the rapidly growing coalition of groups that represent the *traditional* constituency of the Democratic party prior to 1980, will be out in the cold; they will wander in the desert for 40 years. They will come to know what it has felt like to be an actual, traditional New Deal Democrat for the last 40 years.

So buckle up. This is the most *interesting* election season I've ever seen. Interesting elections... aren't actually a good thing. Elections should be boring and predictable. Outcomes should match polling, predictably. Audited results should look sensible. We shouldn't need the campaigns to step in and demand recounts or re-canvasses or report hundreds of blatant errors in order to force the parties to report results correctly. But actual changes, like births and deaths, are always painful.

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