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“Echoes of 71 Days Before the Opportunities of the Next 1,461”

By Kerri J. Malloy

Special Issue: *Trumps America? Disquiet Campus?*

Women, Gender, and Families of Color

Nature has a way of amplifying human emotion in times of joy, sadness, and crises. On November 9, 2016, the sky over Arcata, California was a dull gray with dark foreboding lines that usually precede the onset of a storm, coupled with the mournful silence that permeated both town and campus. Walking across Humboldt State University's campus that day was disquieting experience with a student body of roughly 8,000, and a faculty of over 500, it was reminiscent of a scene from the *Twilight Zone* where the main character wakes up to discover that they are the only individual in the entire town. Walkways were vacant during the transition periods between classes. On the few faces that were making their way between buildings, there was a sullenness that was evocative of the faces of former colleagues on the morning of September 11, 2001. Stillness encompassed the people and buildings; a state of eeriness had taken hold of the campus. By chance, a mentor and colleague was making his way to class; a deep forbiddance was evident on his face all he could muster to say in response to the results of the election the night before was that “it’s like a family member has died.”

Fate had dealt a malicious hand to the campus as it was also the day for the Fall semester unConference themed “Get Uncomfortable at the unConference.” An event that under usual circumstances would have been attended by students, faculty, and staff listening to their peers give five-minute lightning talks on activities, experiences, and research, turned into was transformed into a somber gathering of presenters and organizers. Presenters tried to rise to the moment and turn the sparse audience’s thoughts away from contemplating the reality of the world after twelve-noon on January 20, 2017. This herculean task was hindered by colleagues,

who the day before had posted images on Instagram of their tears of joy brought on by the casting their vote for the first woman presidential candidate, who were now holding back tears as they put all their efforts into just making it through the day. During intermissions, normally filled with the awarding of door prizes, small groups formed to talk and work through the events of the proceeding day. Impromptu talk therapy emerged as the uniting exercise for participants as they prepared to leave the breached sanctuary of blissful academic obliviousness for the reality of the mathematics of the electoral college.

The shock of the 2016 U.S. presidential election reverberated across campuses around the country and locally. Course lectures were abandoned in favor of giving students a place to process and classes were canceled as the stages of grief took hold. In frenzied calculations that were reminiscent of Turing's decoding of the Enigma machine, tenured and adjunct faculty fretted on how to transform the Electoral College vote to reflect that of the popular vote in a futile psychological exercise to push back on political reality. In stark contrast to the portrayal of critical thinkers and scholarly researchers, academics took on the mantle of the undergrad heading into their final exams with the only hope of completing the semester successfully being a perfect score on every test. A frenzied euphoria propelled thoughts into actions whether they were constructive or futile in vague and varied attempts to make sense of the nonsensicalness that was churning into reality. Caught up in this chaos were students who much like the faculty were trying to extrapolate answers and a course of direction in a dazed state following the full frontal blow to the world that they had known. Though they were not consuming every line of rhetoric and interpretation of the impending transition as a call to action like many of their faculty, they were trying to find outlets for their frustration. A comment from a student in a course evaluation asked a simple question, "Why did you cancel class the day after the election?"

I needed to hear from you that everything was going to be OK.” The class had been listed as canceled on the course calendar since the start of the semester', but it was that lost fifty-minutes that was needed help at least one student regroup themselves.

Strategizing various approaches to cope, resist and respond became the call to action for student and faculty communities in the aftermath of the election. Inspired this call the Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences to informally convene members of the faculty at a local brewery to process the changes and conceive strategies to the nation's political leadership that was imminent and its impacts both personally and professionally on faculty. Gathering around a narrow highly varnished redwood slab table political scientists, historians, philosophers, geographers, art historians and scholars of the Middle East and Native America breached the academic department ramparts as they shared their thoughts, analysis, and general fears. Engaging away from the campus to socialize with a purpose provided an outlet to vent in addition to reinforcing comradery amongst colleagues.

In the uncertainty of the days that followed there was a rise in the incidents of attacks based on hate across the country (Hatewatch Staff 2016). To counteract the increase in hate-related violence, the University initiated community forums to develop short and long-term strategies and actions that would help to prevent and counter incidents on and off campus. In and of themselves these community forums were not remarkable, it was the organizers behind them that were remarkable. University campuses are known for their highly protected silos of disciplines, administrators, and support units which have very delineated functions to respond to the effects of the election not as single instruments of support but as a collective. Exchanging ideas and processing strategies, led to one unlikely conversation, when considered in the context of the forum – how do instructors create a learning environment that is welcoming and safe for

those students who answered the call to “Make America Great Again?” Time slowed at the table as the question was given due consideration, the answer was simple, they are students and have all the rights and responsibilities of all other students and should be accorded such. Moving forward requires accepting that not everyone will agree and to make room for those who disagree is essential to a constructive and productive dialogue.

On January 20, 2017, Donald J. Trump was inaugurated as the forty-fifth President of the United States. His inaugural address was less Franklin Roosevelt and more Wes Craven telling the American populous what they should fear. Relating the address to colleagues in the department office that day, who had fortunately not watched it, the only description that seemed to summarize it was dark and ominous. In the lead-up to the inauguration and the preceding days concern for people of color, women, academic disciplines sparked marches of solidarity throughout the country. At the local level streets were filled with women, scientists and allies marching not simply to exercise their First Amendment rights, but to excise their bent up frustration that had been holding onto since June 16, 2015. Piercing questions awaited those who did not march, why were ‘you’ not at the Women’s March, or where was ‘your’ sign for the March for Science were posed quickly with little concern or compassion for the reason of ‘your’ absence. A state of reactive immediacy set in, ‘you’ were either part of the mission to save democracy or a bystander loitering in the way of action.

Fraying the nerves further were the announcements of appointees to the President’s Cabinet which was followed by the deluge of opposition to DeVos, Sessions, Price, and others. Throughout the confirmation process, email inboxes were inundated by the lists of phone numbers to call to voice opposition, petitions to sign and actions to take to impede and stop the confirmation process. Caught up in these campaigns was the business of the day, the responses to

the student requesting to add a class, requests for letters of recommendation and the normal day-to-day manageable chaos that comes with the start of a new semester. Seeking solace and respite from this tidal wave of immediate action was achieved only through disconnecting from the sources of distress and finding meaningful moments to get to lost in.

A new reality set in, one in which Twitter would carry the news of the day. It was and is ever more pressing that faculty assist students in developing their quantitative reasoning skills, and improve their own. With the onslaught of information and misinformation that is bombarding everyone on a daily basis, it is an imperative to develop a means by which to navigate through the maze of information to draw conclusions that are based on fact rather than on suppositions. It has become apparent that the trust prior generations had in the media is absent from the students in the today's classroom. In 2016, the Knight Foundation and the Newseum Institute commissioned a study which found that 59% of college students "have little or no trust in the press" and 26% "consult their social media network" (Gallup 2016). As facilitators in the process of education faculty hold a position that permits them to assist students to move beyond the headlines and hashtags to see what is below the surface to determine the credibility and reliability of the information they are consuming. The unwillingness to understand the media was never more evident than on November 8, 2017, after finishing advising a student in regards to her minor. As she took chocolate from the candy bowl on the table, she said, "I am taking chocolate as after tomorrow I am either being deported or sent to off war. Most likely war. It's all rigged. Newsweek already has a cover with Hillary on it." A moment of clarity set in, she was unaware that media outlets prepare covers and headlines for any outcome. She had not bothered to look beyond the newsfeed on her phone and was adamant that she was not going to cast a vote in a rigged system, even after being shown several news stories explaining the Newsweek cover.

Commencement initiated a much-needed break from the mass hysterics that had become the norm on campus. Daily news on the radio on the ride into work was usurped by music from the 80's and 90's. Walks across campus turned into long drives and flights to visit with family and friends. Quietness set in bringing a relative calm to the white-capped waters of the academic year. Holding on to that the serenity and focusing on what can be done rather than trying to undo what has already done opens the door to possibilities and progress. Stepping back from the campus social network, that is constantly drawn to take action, to work towards systemic institutional change in a methodical and deliberate way for focuses attention on the doable and achievable. Examining how courses can go beyond the specifics of the discipline to bolster the quantitative reasoning skills of students and provide a forum for discussion that connects subject matter to the events of the day.

Three years, three months and twenty-six days remain in the current presidential term, as of this writing. To reach the end with some sense of sanity intact requires a deliberateness rather than an immediacy in actions. Thinking of approaches that will engage students in deciphering the plethora of information at their disposal, helping them to determine between the factual, semi-factual and pulp fiction is one piece of the machine works necessary to process all that has and will happen. Engrossing them in writing that requires reflection not only on course material but also that makes connections with current events, whether in a history, science, literature or economics course, will assist in building that capacity and support the development of deeper quantitative reasoning. Here is an opportunity to center critical thinking and writing in every course as a defense against reliving the evening of November 8, 2016. It is a time to reflect on the bedlam that followed the election, implement the lessons learned and initiate the next age of quantitative enlightenment and an engaged civil society.

The exercise of reflecting on the events, responses, and feelings in the days and months after the election offers a chance to understand the reactions of students, faculty, staff and ourselves at a pivotal moment in United States history. Asking why the results received the reaction that it did? What was the cause of swinging away from the progress of the prior administration? How is it that this was not foreseen? Walking through these questions can aid in the understanding of the election results but not provide a completely clear picture of what happened. On the morning of November 9, 2016, America woke and looked at herself in the mirror and saw the lines, cracks, blemishes, and exhaustion that have been taking a toll on her for centuries. Normally hidden, under layers of cosmetics, the long-standing issues of poverty, race relations, systemic inequality, and white supremacy continued to fester under the facade. For the marginalized, this was not an unknown and did not come as great as a shock, as it did for those who had lived in a fantasy world of privilege that had not been shaken by the tectonic movements of unadulterated misogyny and race politics. Reflecting on the coping mechanisms that were at work on the personal, campus, community and national levels may reveal the strengths and weaknesses that we can rely and improve on to be ready for what is to come from this administration. Maintaining a solid footing, in spite of the constant barrage of executive orders and inflammatory tweets will provide the stability that will be needed in working towards an equitable and informed society and avoid being engulfed by the white noise of the day. Working towards those goals America will hopefully awake on the morning of November 3, 2020, to a reflection with far fewer cracks and blemishes looking back at her from the mirror.

BIOGRAPHY:

Kerri J. Malloy is a lecturer in Native American Studies who identifies as American Indian (Yurok/Karuk), disabled and gay.

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