The Transformation of a Goldwater Girl

Why It Matters in the Time of Trump

his is, in some respects, a ghost story. Both major political parties love to tell scary stories about the other side. Lately, I've been thinking about what that means when it comes to Donald Trump. The short answer: A lot more than one election and a fear, contempt, and ridicule-based campaign that demonizes not only Trump but his overwhelmingly White followers.

Scot Nakagawa and Tarso Luís Ramos recently wrote at PRA about the need to increase the social justice movement's capacity to offer an appealing alternative to the likes of Trump: to compete for Trump's base by expressing authentic empathy and compassion to White working-class voters afraid of falling into poverty—but to do so without abandoning the fight for economic, social, and racial justice.

As it happens, I know something about winning over the Right's rank and file supporters. When I was growing up in southern Colorado, the daughter of "respectable blue collar" parents in a lunch-bucket steel mill town, I was an ardent teenage supporter of Barry Goldwater during his failed but pivotal 1964 presidential campaign. Pundits said, and many believed, that his loss dealt a death-blow to the Right. It was a premature obituary.

Just four years later, former Alabama governor George Wallace ("Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!") ran a surprisingly strong third party, right-wing populist campaign for the presidency, at one point polling a possible 23 percent of the national vote. Then Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated, and Richard Nixon was elected

president.

The Right reinvented itself, but I changed, too. By this time, I was a college student, deeply immersed in movements to fight racism, support farmworker organizing, and oppose the war in Vietnam. My personal political transformation hadn't been a "road to Damascus" epiphany. It was complicated and slow—often painful, always humbling, and sometimes shattering. But ultimately liberating.

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Buttons for the Barry Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964. Photo: Littlejohn Collection, Wofford College via Flickr. License: https:// creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/

I'm no expert in the science of political transformation, and I doubt that anyone is, or that there's much science to it. Yet I believe my experience holds some relevance for the current political moment. Because no matter the outcome in November, this story won't be over. What Trumpism represents is much larger

and more complex than one man or one campaign.

TOWARD TRANSFORMATION

My conservative Republican parents didn't drag me into the 1964 Goldwater campaign. They weren't rabid Right Wingers like the folks in the John Birch Society, whose literature and billboards littered our civic landscape.

But our family was worried about the future; it seemed so tenuous. When I was young, Dad lost a promising job that was supposed to be the first step on the ladder leading into the middle class, and never got a better one. Mom, who was humiliated by teachers' inquiries

as to whether my sister and I were getting enough to eat, went back to work, as a low-paid medical insurance secretary. And while my father was grateful for the job he finally got, monitoring gauges at pump stations for the local water works, he hated that he had to join the union, since he believed guys on the way up didn't belong to unions. He put on a good public front, but my father always felt like a illust. The sale might to be optimistic.

failure. Try as I might to be optimistic, I often felt like a loser, too.

But if we fell short in terms of economic status, at least we were White. Not Ku Klux Klan White, although the Klan once had an influential presence where I grew up. But the kind of Whites who, while not especially mean-spirited, never questioned "respectable" expressions of bigotry or structural forms of racism.

When I was in ninth grade, a friend's mother—who was a rabid Right Winger—seemed to sense my hunger to belong to something bigger and more powerful than myself. She swept me into the 1964 campaign.

Tailor-made for people anxious about

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their futures, Goldwater's campaign was steeped in the fear of enemies. The Civil Rights movement constituted a criminal assault on individual liberty and states' rights that would produce a federal police state in which people would lose the freedom to live as they choose (that is, in segregation). Protest was framed as a breakdown of moral order and an indicator of criminal unrest. Such "welfare state" initiatives as Medicare and Social Security could only foster pathological and parasitical dependencies—primarily in Black communities, we understood. But vicariously, through Gold-

water, we would beat back those enemies. We would win.

Liberals cheered Goldwater's epic defeat. But their glee was misplaced. Even

in losing, Goldwater changed mainstream political possibilities. He'd been willing to wage tactical nuclear warfare. His campaign helped set the stage for what would become the Republican "Southern Strategy," which refined racist dog whistling to an art and ultimately delivered the historically Democratic South to the GOP. Fear, resentment, and the presumption of superiority were the glues that bonded people, including me, to his campaign. Paradoxically, to supporters, those sentiments had felt comforting, even hopeful. I was stunned by the magnitude of the loss. That liberal glee, stamping me once again as a loser. cut to the quick.

My arc towards progressivism began in 1965, during my last two years of high school, thanks to one courageous classmate and three remarkable teachers who challenged me to reconsider my views. They did it individually, in a multitude of ways, including sharing their own beliefs and telling me more about themselves. While often putting me uncomfortably on the spot, they were never demonizing, ridiculing, or demeaning. No one tried to tell me what I should believe. They listened as much as they talked.

When I could so easily have been a symbolic representation of everything they held in contempt, my classmate and these teachers looked more deeply and, with no guarantees, reached for the most human and the best in me. And at

some point, I started to reach back.

I began to see what was obvious, but what I'd never paid attention to before. Poverty was widespread in my hometown, and it was intensely raced, as was every aspect of civic, social and economic life. The Red Scare was a way to avoid facing injustice at home while barricading yourself against danger and creating a military on steroids. The Goldwater folks taught me to build community by defining myself against enemies, but when you do that, you're always anxious about anyone who isn't just like you.

It's excruciating to feel your own edi-

People didn't write me off. I must do the same.

fice of defense begin to crumble, to see your own beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors in a clearer, harsher, light. But those three teachers and that classmate made it possible for me to come through it without feeling so cornered that I had no choice but to hit back out of anger and shame.

This is why I think it's so important to try, as progressives, to compete for the part of Trump's audience that may be reachable. People didn't write me off. I must do the same.

BEYOND GOLDWATER, WALLACE, AND TRUMP

In 1968, in the wake of the King and Kennedy assassinations, so-called "race riots" broke out in more than 100 U.S. cities. Anti-war protesters at the Democratic National Convention were met with violent responses from Chicago police. And George Wallace ran for president as an independent. Although he ultimately lost, I was shocked by how much support he elicited in my hometown, then a reliably Democratic stronghold.

From the outside, Wallace's right-wing populist crusade looked like nothing more than crude demagoguery. But people I knew who supported Wallace felt that he alone understood their struggles and fears. The local steel mill, a huge employer, was already feeling the discomfiting stirrings of what, in a little more than a decade, would become a

full-fledged steel market crash. Simultaneously, Anglo supremacist norms were being challenged. The world they knew was coming apart, and they desperately wanted someone to put it back together. In Wallace's vision, their lives became meaningful, their futures more hopeful. Unlike Goldwater, Wallace played directly to people whose lives were of no concern to those who dominated the political discourse.

I see so much of Wallace in Trump. Like the former governor, Trump has an instinct for tapping racial and economic anxieties in emotionally-charged and,

to many, compelling ways. But ghost stories, whether told by the Right or the Left, only amplify anxiety. They don't produce more just societies.

Somebody's got to do the work of engaging ordinary White folks who support Trump, as well as other right-wing agendas. If we don't, right-wing populism will reappear again and again, in forms that have evolved to adapt to changing conditions.

It's not sexy work. It requires a kind of radical compassion that resists the easy politics of contempt and dehumanization. It would be so much easier to simply distance ourselves from people we've come to regard as bigoted, benighted, and lost—the "basket of deplorables," if you will. But "easier" never created political transformation. And believe me, as someone whose almost 50 years of progressive activism speaks to the power of engagement with real human beings rather than demonized ghosts, I know that it can be done. ©

Kay Whitlock is a writer and activist who has been involved with racial, gender, queer, and economic justice movements since 1968. She is coauthor of two books: Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics and the award-winning Queer (In) Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States. She is also cofounder and contributing editor for the weekly Criminal Injustice series at CriticalMassProgress.com. She lives in Missoula, Montana.

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