

Homeless in America

Thomas L. Friedman NOV. 8, 2016

I began election night writing a column that started with words from an immigrant, my friend Lesley Goldwasser, who came to America from Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Surveying our political scene a few years ago, Lesley remarked to me: “You Americans kick around your country like it’s a football. But it’s not a football. It’s a Fabergé egg. You can break it.”

With Donald Trump now elected president, I have more fear than I’ve ever had in my 63 years that we could do just that — break our country, that we could become so irreparably divided that our national government will not function.

From the moment Trump emerged as a candidate, I’ve taken seriously the possibility that he could win; this column never predicted otherwise, although it certainly wished for it. That doesn’t mean the reality of it is not shocking to me.

As much as I knew that it was a possibility, the stark fact that a majority of Americans wanted radical, disruptive change so badly and simply did not care who the change agent was, what sort of role model he could be for our children, whether he really had any ability to execute on his plan — or even really had a plan to execute on — is profoundly disturbing.

Before I lay out all my fears, is there any silver lining to be found in this vote? I’ve been searching for hours, and the only one I can find is this: I don’t think Trump was truly committed to a single word or policy he offered during the campaign, except one phrase: “I want to win.”

But Donald Trump cannot be a winner unless he undergoes a radical change in personality and politics and becomes everything he was not in this campaign. He has to become a healer instead of a divider; a compulsive truth-teller rather than a compulsive liar; someone ready to study problems and make decisions based on evidence, not someone who just shoots from the hip; someone who tells people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear; and someone who appreciates that an interdependent world can thrive only on win-win relationships, not zero-sum ones.

I can only hope that he does. Because if he doesn’t, all of you who voted for him — overlooking all of his obvious flaws — because you wanted radical, disruptive change, well, you’re going to get it.

I assume that Trump will not want to go down as the worst president in history, let alone the one who presided over the deepest fracturing of our country since the Civil War. It would shake the whole world. Therefore, I can only hope that he will, as president, seek to surround himself with the best people he can, which surely doesn’t

include the likes of Rudy Giuliani or Newt Gingrich, let alone the alt-right extremists who energized his campaign.

But there is also a deeply worrying side to Trump's obsession with "winning." For him, life is always a zero-sum game: I win, you lose. But when you're running the United States of America, everything can't be a zero-sum game.

"The world only stays stable when countries are embedded in win-win relationships, in healthy interdependencies," observed Dov Seidman, the C.E.O. of LRN, which advises companies on leadership, and the author of the book "How."

For instance, America undertook the Marshall Plan after World War II — giving millions of dollars to Europe — to build it up into a trading partner and into a relationship that turned out to be of great mutual benefit. Does Trump understand that? Do those who voted for him understand how many of their jobs depend on America being embedded in healthy interdependencies around the world?

How do I explain Trump's victory? Way too soon to say for sure, but my gut tells me that it has much less to do with trade or income gaps and much more to do with culture and many Americans' feeling of "homelessness."

There is nothing that can make people more angry or disoriented than feeling they have lost their home. For some it is because America is becoming a minority-majority country and this has threatened the sense of community of many middle-class whites, particularly those living outside the more cosmopolitan urban areas.

For others it is the dizzying whirlwind of technological change we're now caught up in. It has either wiped out their job or transformed their workplace in ways they find disorienting — or has put stressful demands on them for lifelong learning. When the two most important things in your life are upended — the workplace and community that anchor you and give you identity — it's not surprising that people are disoriented and reach for the simplistic solutions touted by a would-be strongman.

What I do know for certain is this: The Republican Party and Donald Trump will have control of all the levers of government, from the courts to the Congress to the White House. That is an awesome responsibility, and it is all going to be on them. Do they understand that?

Personally, I will not wish them ill. Too much is at stake for my country and my children. Unlike the Republican Party for the last eight years, I am not going to try to make my president fail. If he fails, we all fail. So yes, I will hope that a better man emerges than we saw in this campaign.

But at the moment I am in anguish, frightened for my country and for our unity. And for the first time, I feel homeless in America.