

Love in the Time of COVID-19

With Miki Kashtan

This has been and continues to be a super contentious US election where concerns about a coup, significant street violence, and even full-on civil war remain¹. Much of this was written on Oct 22nd, twelve days before the election. I've been updating this here and there, knowing that no matter when I make the final update, some part or another of the facts on the ground will have changed by the time it actually goes out.

I took the title Love in the Time of COVID-19 from a favorite book, replacing “cholera” with “COVID-19” for all too painfully obvious reasons. I want to talk of love. And I want to talk of love that isn't “sentimental and anemic” as Martin Luther King, Jr., said. I want to talk of love of life, of people, of vision. I want to talk of the necessity of love in the midst of devastation and disintegration. I start by naming what I see:

Many people are preparing for the election and its aftermath in various ways, depending on where they are. Far-right armed militia people are taking their cue from Donald Trump, preparing by increasing their physical presence in the streets of the US. The month of July 2020 saw more gun sales than almost all of 2019. Thousands of people are getting training in nonviolent direct action from various organizations to be ready to take to streets to stop a coup. Police departments across the US are preparing for increased street violence. Having been outside the US now for ten months, I don't have a visceral sense of it any longer. I know that people I speak with are deeply concerned. So am I.

In case you are still wondering why a coup and possible violence are an issue, watch Van Jones in this [video](#) to understand why a coup is possible and read this [interview](#) with nonviolence scholar and activist Erica Chenoweth to understand what a nonviolent response could look like. As I am doing my final update, there are still five states that haven't been called yet, and tension is rising. Donald Trump has already filed lawsuits about vote counts. None of us knows what is going to happen. The final vote count may still make him a winner. And it appears more likely as of this writing that he will lose. Even then, until and unless he concedes, the election season is not over, and could continue to escalate all the way to January 20, the day the inauguration is routinely scheduled to happen. The laws governing what could happen are not sufficiently specified, and there have been very few exceptions to smooth transitions of power. This election season is clearly one of them.

The level of polarization in US culture, already immense only a few years ago, has accelerated to unprecedented degrees in my lifetime. The combination of Trump's way of inhabiting his role as president, increasing climate-change-related events, continued police violence against Black people and now also against protesters, and a pandemic that's been used for fomenting rage create a perfect storm for potential breakdown. As a recent New York Magazine [article](#) points out, the growing violence is vaguely accepted rather than condemned by wide swaths of the population. How can love be of service in these times in particular?

On a recent “Reckoning with Collapse” call, I spoke with a member of a group that's organizing for protective measures against cell tower radiation within her county. She recently discovered that all the others in her group, people she has come to see as dear friends, are Trump supporters who subscribe to certain narratives, (which many people, though not those in her group, call “conspiracy theories”) that she finds immensely difficult to relate to. I don't see it as my role to evaluate these claims, nor do I believe I know whether or not any of it is true. Instead, I see my role as supporting the search for love in the face of it all. Since she knows and cares about the people in her group, I asked “Do you

¹This [image](#) is quite tame compared to some I have seen. The one that most haunts me is at the top of this Time Magazine article. We cannot display it here because of copyright laws.

understand why someone who is intelligent, whom you otherwise respect, would adopt these views?" With this, I was looking for what values they hold in common. Initially she quickly listed human needs that didn't touch her heart. Instead, I wanted her, and all of us, to really imagine, together, the experience of the people she was talking about. Precisely because of the existing mutual respect and care within her group, this was a fantastic opportunity for connection across a chasm that typically results in people writing each other off. I accompanied her while she held the need for individual freedom in reverence.

Then we went more deeply into what their actual narrative is, and given what they believe, why they are in despair. Love allows deep enough understanding to truly see the person who otherwise does not make any sense whatsoever to us. I have no interest in engaging with specific claims, because I really have no way of knowing what is true. I want to engage this question: If it's true, then what is the danger? What do they care about in their doom story? We involved others on the call to find what members of her group could possibly be passionate about. The answer, once we dug deeply enough, surprised all of us; it was, ultimately, the sanctity of human life that emerged as the shared value. I myself would never have thought of this until it arrived.

Any time we lovingly explore with this level of interest and care, it changes us. It brings us closer to vision, imagination, and curiosity, and it thus takes us out of our own stuck narrative. I recognize how I distance myself from the men with guns in images of the far-right militia. It's so easy to do this. It's much harder to imagine being them, imagine how it would actually feel to be so angry and frightened about certain things to be willing to kill others. I have read quite a bit about the historical plight of the white working class in the US and have an abstract understanding of the reasons for the enormous humiliation and rage people feel. On the visceral level, it's currently still beyond my imagination, and I am eager to find access to it. I want so much to retain the sense that they are fellow human beings, more like me than not. At the least, I can remember they were once little boys. Children, like all of us. It's more transformative, I learned again, to ask what they care about than to ask why they hold certain views and what is appealing about them. Focusing on what they care about leads to commonality and curiosity. The other question leads to analysis and has the potential for superiority in it. We need all the humility we can muster in these times to be people who keep the thread of connection intact in times when all around us we see the human fabric becoming threadbare.

This love is not a reason for inaction. Understanding what is important to others does not mean we give up on what matters to those of us who are horrified by what is unfolding in the US. What this love changes is only how we respond. If we take to the streets to stand up to a ruling class gone awry, we can still do it with love rather than hate. If there is any path forward, I can only see it being a path of love.