



UP
front

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There's a lot of bad, scary stuff going on around the world now. Not only now, but most, if not all, the time. As an essayist, as a human being, how do you find the balance between paying attention to it and getting on with your "regular" life?

If I think, then write, about Israel, for example, from the comfortable confines of a targeted-distribution magazine that has no geopolitical focus, do I seem unqualified at best and, worse – presumptuous and inappropriate? But, at a time of significant global suffering (which is – actually – always, somewhere), if I turn my energy and my pen on the (new) guy down the street (even though he isn't down the street at all – he's on Tybee – as he has converted his recently acquired "residence" into an office building with lighted window signs and sidewalk sandwich boards) who has obliterated a historic residential garden adjacent to the city's signature square to construct an unsightly swimming pool to serve guests from hundreds of vacation rentals, do I seem petty, NIMBY-bound, and oblivious of more significant societal strife? Probably, but that's life.

Action is a constructive solution. In a democratic society, what power do we have to impact conditions locally and globally? We have our votes, and our communications with and influence on our elected officials. Based on the bevy of yard signs in and around the periphery of this city, I surmise there's an election coming soon. Investigation confirms it. A "general" election on November 7, with early voting already underway. A paper precinct card arrived in the old-fashioned mail last week, affirming my registration and – in naggingly small print – telling me that, if I show up where I always vote, I'll be in the wrong place.

But, okay, I'll try to find my new polling location, and I'll arrive prepared. So I Google: Savannah Elections November 2023. Then, I Google: Chatham County Elections November 2023. And I Google: A whole bunch of variations on this theme. You can try it yourself. Click the links that Google returns to you. Work your way to the "display sample ballot" tabs. Email me if you do better than "not available." You will have outdone me.

"Death of Democracy" is an ominous catchphrase designed, in part, to discount half the country's philosophical preferences. Death of competent, functioning democracy at the grassroots level is a sadly real thing. I've been asked to financially support local candidates

in many races over the years. If one impresses me, I will. Generally, though, I don't make political contributions. I have limited financial resources, and I believe my charitable giving can be better used other ways to positively effect social change. A friend said to me (paraphrasing) 'I just think you're cheap,' after I declined to buy a ticket to a local candidate fundraiser and explained why. When I pushed back, he countered with what I hear often from many people, whether it's an election for city council or President of the United States (paraphrasing again): 'He might not be great, but the other guy would be a disaster.' What if we chose our spouses using this metric? Or our friends? Or our hobbies? "She's a solid C-minus, but I guess it beats an F" is not the pathway to long-term bliss.

I'm not sure how this would work, but it intrigues me: Extending the spousal-choice metaphor...what's the alternative for miserably condemning yourself to eternity with the C-minus? Single life. In other words, sometimes no-choice-at-all is the best choice. Could we apply this tactic to the democratic process? If we refused support (financially, electorally...ignored them altogether), en masse, for a systemically sub-standard political class, would the "free market" produce better options? Maybe. But it won't happen because we all fear that our temporary withdrawal irrevocably cedes monolithic power to the dreaded other side. This is the fundamental flaw with two-party democracy: It perpetuates its binary mediocrity through fear of the The Other. Give me the wilted, browning lettuce, at least it's better than a diet of dirt and ants.

I'm past deadline. I'll stop now. And go to early-vote. When I get in front of the machine, I'll learn for whom and what I'm voting. And I'll do my best to select the least-bad option. If and when he or she takes office, I'll make sure to email him/her about the guy down the street with the clandestine commercial pool.

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