

Reform
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My daughter and I always used to sit in front of the television, turn on the news, and talk about politics. She was a bright, critical-thinking individual who I knew was going to change the world, and I was very proud of her. I had raised her to be critical of the media, and we often commented on the idiocy or intelligence of the news reports.

Our favorite time was campaign season, when all the presidential candidates rushed to please their audiences and gain office. There was one candidate, Republican Nick Walton, who was higher in the polls than anybody else. It was strange that he scored so high because he was really a businessman by trade and not that good a politician. He had no idea what he was doing and just lunged forward, not caring whom he trampled over on the way, be they citizens, countries, or even people of great importance that he would have to work with if he became president. Every day his name was heard, rarely for the better, and yet he still scored high in every poll. I didn't know who was voting for him. It certainly wasn't me, for I was a very strong democrat. Even if I was a republican, I wouldn't have voted for him.

We, unlike most people, took the campaigns very seriously. Most people vote for a candidate for simple reasons: they are in the same party, they hear the candidate's name all the time, or even because everybody else is voting for that candidate. I did not get swept up into society's tidal wave. I watched the debates and made a completely independent decision.

I was a psychiatrist, so I often had meetings with other behavior specialists to talk about new treatments and theories. I was at one such meeting when the subject turned to pressures, a topic I knew very well.

"I just don't see what you're saying," said the always-critical Dr. Johnson.

"It's obvious," I said. "Just take the Frischen Principle and apply it here."

"The Frischen Principle?" Johnson scoffed. "That was proven wrong years ago."

I halted. He was right; I remembered reading the article. I felt embarrassed. This was one of my best subjects, one I had written my masters thesis on, and I had made a trivial mistake on it before fellow experts. I felt insecurity sliding down my throat.

"I'm sorry, you're right," I said.

The next day I felt good again. I hummed as I made my way to the grocery store. Inside, I watched the shoppers as they went, halting at a spot where there were a multitude of brands of the same product, looking around for a second, then usually choosing the one with the least in stock and moving on. This was social instinct. People relied on others to determine their behavior. They didn't always know it; sometimes they just figured that the brand that everybody else was buying was the best. Why else would everybody be buying it?

I turned my attention to my own grocery list. I had to buy milk. But when I looked at the fridge, my usual brand was gone. Now I had a choice to make: buy two-percent milk, or non-fat.

A woman walked by and saw me staring at the fridge.

"Having trouble choosing?" she said.

"Yeah, I can't decide between two-percent or non-fat," I said. I reached out for the door. "Maybe I'll take the non-fat."

"No, no, get the two-percent," she replied. "Haven't you heard all the buzz? Non-fat isn't really good for you."

"Thanks," I said. I picked up the two-percent and, whistling merrily, moved on.

My daughter and I sat watching an interview with Nick Walton as he tried to explain why banking should be unregulated.

“Nothing but politi-speak and patriotic buzzwords,” my daughter said. “Hasn’t that guy ever had a history lesson?”

“Maybe he doesn’t need one,” I said. “I mean, he’s worked in banking, so I’m sure he knows what’s best for it.”

What was I saying? I sounded just like any shallow-minded thinker.

“Dad, are you actually supporting a republican?” my daughter asked.

“Yeah, maybe I should go to bed,” I said. I got up and headed toward the bedroom.

What was going on? I wasn’t usually like this. Maybe I was just tired. I climbed into the bed and went to sleep.

Something scary was happening to me. At first I had just ignored it, but then it got too big to ignore. I found myself dependant on social media. I had started getting addicted, logging on to check what other people thought every time I could, getting anxious when I hadn’t been online for too long. I began using it to determine who had won the debates instead of watching them myself. It was unusual and it was freaking me out. I was not one to like social media. I didn’t trust society because I knew what it could do. Society could make everybody hate everybody else, kill all other people, and not care. It was irrational and turned people into shallow thinkers who did what it told them to do. They were diminished into simple workers, bodies it used to ensure its survival. It ripped apart individuality and independence and tolerance, and that was why I hated it.

So why was I constantly going onto social media?

Thinking about it made me smile. It was just a bunch of nonsense, what harm was it really? I chuckled, thinking that I had been paranoid. Paranoia was not good. It was easy to say that. I needed to calm down, so I took out my phone and logged onto Facebook. A little mindless reading would lower my stress.

I continued on with my life and my life continued getting worse. I realized that something had gotten inside me, corrupting my beliefs. I had begun shifting my habits: worrying about my weight, watching prime-time shows that I never watched, even believing everything the news told me. I knew the facts; that I was at a healthy weight, those shows weren’t really my taste, and that the news often lies and exaggerates, but I didn’t care. It made no difference. That was when I realized that my rationality was slipping away, and I began to look at the other parts of me potentially in danger. My individuality was being eaten by some parasite, my independence also turning into dust.

Everywhere I turned, it followed me. It was there in the normal things I did: in the washing of the clothes, the eating of my food, and the practice of my job. I walked along the sidewalk to work and realized that everybody else was following the sidewalk too, even though cutting across the grass was a much shorter path. I wanted to leap and run across the grass, but I didn’t; I refused to leave the sidewalk, every time. I saw everything I did as an action approved by society, and I didn’t know whether that was good or bad. I belonged to society, I had always belonged to it and never realized. But now my eyes were open and I was aware that society had a grip on me, and its grip was growing and growing until eventually it would envelope me and I would diminish into one of its drones, unwitting and reliant on its honey, no longer a free master of myself as I had been before. I didn’t want that. I longed to be back to the way I was.

But was there a way I had been before? As I had determined, I had always been a part of this society, and I had liked it. Everything had been fine and I had had no worries. So why was I worrying now? None of it made any sense. I couldn’t see why I framed society as an evil monster, destroyer of worlds, bringer of pain and suffering. Society supported me, helped me when I faltered, pulled me up when I fell down. It was nice to me, kind to me, and I couldn’t betray it. That was against Society’s rules. It made me happy, and, like everybody, I dearly wanted to be happy.

Voting day. I entered the booth and stared down at the names on the screen. Democrat: Hank Arnoldson. Republican: Nick Walton. Arnoldson was a good leader with excellent ideas that could easily lead the country into greatness. Walton was an egocentric idiot who had only made it this far because of all the mindless voters who chose him just because they heard his name. This vote would determine the future of the country, of the American People. The choice was obvious.

“I don’t believe it,” my daughter said, unsmiling, not laughing, as we watched Nick Walton take the oath. “I thought everybody was joking. I seriously hoped they were all joking.” I had nothing to say. I sat there, grinning, as I watched the grim future unfold. “Nicholas Walton, I officially declare you President of the United States.”