

TALKS WITH MY FATHER

“First, this great and glorious country was built up by political parties; second, parties can’t hold together if their workers don’t get the offices when they win; third, if the parties go to pieces, the government they built up must go to pieces, too; fourth, then there’ll be hell to pay.”

—George Washington Plunkitt, *A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*

Julia Louis-Dreyfus sat a few rows in front of me at my cousin’s college graduation a few years ago. Maybe she had a son or niece or second cousin, once removed graduating — I’m not sure. But as soon as my mom pointed out her signature high-octane, semi-political, you-could-sell-a-lock-of-this-on-Ebay-and-pay-three-months’-rent hairstyle in the seats before me, I had trouble actually focusing on the speaker, television writer Greg Berlanti (though I’m sure your speech was exceptional, Mr. Berlanti).

At a reception several hours later, I made a point to tell her how much I adored her work as Elaine Benes in *Seinfeld*, and especially as Senator-turned-Vice-President-turned-President-turned-Public-Disgrace-turned-President-again Selina Meyer in the TV show *Veep*.

I didn’t doubt that celebrities suffered this treatment often, but I knew I was special enough to make my commendations memorable, though I’d be surprised if our micro-interaction held any place in her memory (she was exceedingly kind, so I can’t complain either way). Our conversation lasted all of twenty seconds, and at the end I asked if she would take a second to “impersonate” Selina — a demonically corrupt, power-infected politician — and though she looked at me with amused dread, she uttered in faux Presidential tone Selina’s signature ruse: “Politics is about people.”

She started laughing before she could finish the sentence.

And laughing along seemed like the shrewd thing for me to do as somebody from across the room beckoned her over, her departing smile torn between genuine Julia Louis-Dreyfusness and artificial Selina Meyer-ness. A career in politics seemed a long way off for me at the time, but it struck me that not even an actress could believe herself.

I’m not from a political family like the Roosevelts or Kennedys or Bushes. I have no political connections, save a great-great-uncle who was the mayor of a California town that doesn’t exist anymore. I was not pumped from the start with political blood — no “silver tongue,” no orchestrated grooming, no inferiority complex with an older brother who got my dad’s name and all his love and affection along with it.

But like many other American families, mine talks about politics. A lot. If I’m late on a homework assignment, it’s probably because I was stuck at the dinner table for two and a half hours, parrying my father’s claims about the reliability of government-driven climate research with this article I found from the Cato Institute — and they’re libertarian too, Dad!

I may not speak politic with the swiftest possible persuasion, I admit. I stumble. I emote. I ad hominem. I’m working on it.

But those talks (yells, sometimes) have made me politically aware in a way that I wouldn’t be if my parents agreed with me on every issue and weren’t — let’s face it — just as stubborn as I am. I couldn’t vote in this past election (a grievance I blame entirely on my parents’ inconsiderate negligence to birth me just a few months earlier), so I urged those of age I knew to register, I walked a few of them through the process, I attempted to work at the polls (my applications sadly did not go through) — I did everything I thought I could. My dad still votes, even though he believes that every politician is a mini-Selina Meyer, looking to cash in on the next electoral payday.

With a few exceptions, every time I read a book or article on

politics, I want to fill my eye sockets with gravel. Most sound either like slightly refined versions of cable TV rants or like achingly long college essays, and once you’ve gleaned the author’s political persuasion, you can guess from the first couple lines what the rest of the article is going to say with alarming precision. If you find that’s the case with the next several paragraphs, I will have failed.

So, in that spirit, I’d like to share one of my hypotheses.

Were you to tune into one of our family dinners, I’d appear to agree with my dad on almost nothing politically. Among our only plots of common ground is opposing the death penalty — I believe it’s inhumane; he believes the government should not have the right to kill. Few moments of harmony elsewhere.

I can’t remember what issue we were discussing that night. I think it had to do with guns. But I remember we both realized almost simultaneously that we were hurling nearly identical arguments at each other, refuting what we ourselves were saying, because we saw ourselves on opposing sides of a fictitious aisle. It was a synthetic issue — made-up resentment formed from a made-up argument.

And herein lies the lesson:

Many arguments are synthetic.

Most people don’t care about politics at all — the Selina Meyer kind, anyway. That sort of politics doesn’t have issues.

It doesn’t have authentic hostility or hostile authenticity. It has only the business of politics — the behind-the-scenes, Little Magician kind of orchestration in which people are collateral damage.

I don’t mean to demonize that kind of political operation. It’s a living, and the way our country is set up. George Plunkitt is right: if the partisans go, the government goes, too. And it’s unfortunate for representative democracy, but until I become smarter and better informed, I don’t know how to fix it yet.

Plunkitt’s ideas were wrought in the Gilded Age of the late 19th century. At a time when political divisions were higher than they’d ever been, he learned to take advantage of them for his own advancement, and he narrated his triumphs in the most sincerely corrupt way possible so that we, the future generations, might pay attention. Selina Meyer did the same thing.

That kind of machination feeds on low political involvement and high resentment toward those not in one’s imaginary box because only then can it disregard the muddy hindrance of actual issue-driven policy. It requires that we see life as political, as though we spend nine months running for office and 70 years striving to stay there, and the earlier we quit, the more respect we eke out.

Partisanship is not an aberration destroying our country; it’s working precisely to the benefit of the Plunkitts and Meyers of the world, whose livelihoods depend upon late-night kitchen table screaming sessions and who thrive only on divisiveness and polarization.

But it’s not our job to make villains out of those politicians. It’s our job to live our lives and talk to each other in such a way that their livelihood has no reason to exist.

Then, and only then, are politics about people.



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