

Election Should Spur Prayer and Resistance
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In a college classroom overlooking New York City's Broadway, during the weeks surrounding Donald Trump's troubling election, I've been teaching the writing of the Midwestern novelist Marilynne Robinson. Her trio of novels about the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, reminds me of what it meant to grow up in Waterford, where church grounded my life and the lives of my neighbors and where I came to value hard work and family, public education and the significance of sports and sportsmanship. It may be that some readers remember me from town. My mother and sister live off Buena Park Road. My brother teaches in the high school.

Central to Robinson's Iowa novels is a confrontation with American history—with the racial conflicts that, in the years before the Civil War, led Christian abolitionists to settle in the Midwest to forestall the spread of slavery, using violence when necessary. These novels also highlight desperate poverty, loneliness, and the democratic and religious spirit that stands in defense of the poor. Robinson is a Christian novelist, and while I was raised in Waterford's Catholic church and not Robinson's Congregationalist one, her brand of Christianity is one that speaks to me, though I'm not a churchgoer anymore. One notion of prayer on display in the novel *Lila* resonates especially now, in my grief: "She meant to ask him sometime how praying is different from worrying." I'm deeply worried, which may mean that for the first time in fifteen years, as I consider the chasm that separates me from town where I was raised, I'm praying.

The Trump-Pence ticket won 1875 votes in Waterford. The Clinton-Kaine ticket won 877 votes. These are unofficial numbers that, when I read them, shocked me.

Though I occasionally visit, this vote suggests that I no longer know the place where I was raised. I write to try to change that. I have not paid close enough attention to the pain and isolation Trump spoke to in his campaign. Perhaps readers will write me to explain.

It's also possible that I misremember slightly my hometown and the virtues I was raised with. I certainly recall a casual racism and homophobia that pervaded my youth. There must be other middle-aged people who recall playing childhood games called "N**** Pile" and "Smear the Queer"; these are games of piling-on, games of bullies, that one cannot play by himself.

Despite these terrible games, I eventually learned to stand up against bullies and people who feared difference. My mother was, for a time, a single mother, and in Waterford I learned to respect women, not hate them. I left home feeling well prepared to participate in a democracy where I would encounter people of all faiths, and learn to pray with them. Where I might know gay men and women—I knew none then—and see myself and my God in them.

Trump, a bully, has presented himself as a misogynist and racist. His anti-immigration rhetoric and the symbols adopted by many of his supporters recall the Third Reich. He has made people I know—Muslims, immigrants, people of color—worry for their lives. This is not what I learned of leadership or democracy as a child. I know I am repeating what's been said against the president-elect throughout the campaign, but it bears repeating because his rhetoric plays on our very worst fears—of each other and what we might call the "sinister other."

My students are grieving as I am grieving. We have Marilynne Robinson guiding us, which helps, but in terms of what I could present in class—in this case, an interview with President Obama—she's only issued a warning: "When [the fear of a sinister other] is brought home ... I think that that really is about as dangerous a development as there could be in terms of

whether we continue to be a democracy.” It’s up to us—teachers and students alike, parents and children together—to continue our democracy. Which means that despite the vote from home, I must stand against the president-elect. And I must ask you, with respect and gratitude, to join me—in conversation first, and then perhaps soon, in prayer and resistance as well.