

A BLIZZARD OF ONE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
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Almost no one saw a Trump presidency coming – no one. His candidacy was dismissed at every level, and at every stage, and by everyone. His presidency has become conceivable only now that it's inevitable.

How did this happen? The post-mortem of the 2016 presidential election will go on for dozens of years, among thousands of commentators and pundits, and in hundreds of PhD dissertations – why Trump won, how he won, and even whether he won. One of the most salient analyses I've seen thus far has been proposed by George Lakoff, an emeritus professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at Berkeley and director of the Center for the Neural Mind and Society. He's author of the acclaimed books *Don't Think of an Elephant!* and *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, among many others.

Lakoff's basic thesis, which runs through all of his books, is that each of us views the world through frames that are powerfully shaped by metaphors. Many of these metaphors, he says, were wired into our neural networks as children. They remain powerfully present – even if unconsciously – as we decide what to do as adults, including how to vote. He says that our view of the government as adults replicates the basic metaphor that was instilled in us as children about our families. Whatever parental role was most needed or most dominant during our upbringing, we expect the government to fill that role when we reach adulthood.

On these terms, Lakoff says, liberals view our nation as needing the government to serve as a nurturing mother. Conservatives, on the other hand, view our nation as needing the government to serve as a strict father. These metaphors mostly operate in the unconscious realm of human experience. According to Lakoff, the genius of democracy, if indeed you want to call it genius, is that it responds not to what people say they want, but rather to what people most deeply want. In his view, democracy responds powerfully to the collective social unconscious.

For whatever reason, and for better or for worse, Trump was attuned to America's social unconscious, and Clinton and the pundits were not. Even though no one saw Trump coming, Lakoff says in a recent blog post, he responded to what many people most deeply wanted, which is why he will soon become president of the most powerful nation on Earth.

No one saw Jesus of Nazareth coming either. He was born in the humblest of circumstances and raised in relative obscurity. No one thought this would-be prophet from the hinterlands north of Jerusalem would become an influential figure, either

religiously or politically. In those days, Palestine was crawling with self-proclaimed and fringe-dwelling messiahs. Most promised their followers quick deliverance from the self-righteous elitism of the dominant Jewish religion.

At best, Jesus and his ragtag band of followers were an irritating swarm of theological gadflies, a reform movement within Judaism that would almost certainly fade into oblivion. Like a thousand dissidents before him, Jesus might manage to garner his fifteen minutes of fame out in the boondocks. But all the smart money knew that when his show reached the big town of Jerusalem, the curtain would surely fall on his little drama before the first act even ended.

The prospect that Jesus might become a power player on the political front was even more ludicrous. Compared to the world-dominating power of the vaunted Roman military forces occupying the region, the threat posed by these stragglers from the north wasn't even worthy of informed comment. It's worth noting that our primary source of news about Jesus comes from documents — gospels, they are called — that seek not to assess his actual impact, but rather to enhance and expand his legacy. In other words, the gospels are not the Jerusalem equivalent of the *Wall Street Journal* or CNN, but press releases from Christ the King, Inc.

Despite what would transpire in the decades and centuries after his death, the possibility that Jesus might have been a historic figure never crossed the minds of his contemporaries. The Roman writers of the period make no mention of Jesus or the religious reforms he championed. Only one Jewish writer — Josephus, in his chronicle of Jewish wars during the first century of the Common Era — even mentions Jesus of Nazareth, and that reference may have been added to the manuscript at a later time. By all indications, Jesus was an insignificant pebble thrown into the vast sea of human experience. Barely a ripple, and then nothing — nothing, that is, except what eventually became the largest and most pervasive religious movement in human history.

The only faint hint that the influence of Jesus might endure occurs in Luke's account of Jesus' march into Jerusalem. During this event, which the followers of Jesus later began calling the Triumphal Entry, Jesus was asked by local leaders to silence the people who were chanting to celebrate his imminent reign as king. Jesus replied with a phrase that echoes the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk: "I tell you," Jesus said, "if these people were silent, the stones would shout out."

The longings expressed by my followers, Jesus seems to be saying, are so profoundly embedded and so palpably present that even stones could bear witness to what these people most deeply want. To my knowledge, George Lakoff hasn't yet weighed in on whether Jesus' remark reveals his intuitive awareness of the social unconscious of his day. But Jesus obviously had his finger on a pulse no one else had felt. By rights, his life should have ended as it began: in nameless obscurity. But his death was only the beginning. The legacy of Jesus of Nazareth has changed life on earth irrevocably, in ways that are both wonderful and terrible.

The celebrated American poet Mark Strand won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for a collection published the previous year titled *A Blizzard of One*. This book title appears in the second line of a short poem titled “A Piece of the Storm.” The poem reads:

From the shadow of domes in the city of domes,
A snowflake, a blizzard of one, weightless, entered your room
And made its way to the arm of the chair where you, looking up
From your book, saw it the moment it landed. That's all
There was to it. No more than a solemn waking
To brevity, to the lifting and falling away of attention, swiftly,
A time between times, a flowerless funeral. No more than that
Except for the feeling that this piece of the storm,
Which turned into nothing before your eyes, would come back,
That someone years hence, sitting as you are now, might say:
“It's time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening.”

This is an extraordinary poem, in my view, abundantly worthy of a Pulitzer Prize. It's about one of the most insubstantial and ephemeral of objects – a snowflake. At first you barely notice it, and then it's not there. To see a snowflake is to awaken to brevity – to the existence not of time, but only to the time between times. To see it land is to see all there is to see. It disappears before your eyes. There's nothing more.

Except that there is something more. There's also the feeling that this fleeting fleck is a part of something vast and powerful, something you haven't seen and perhaps don't even know exists. Yet you have a feeling that there's a storm somewhere, and this snowflake is a piece of it. And somehow, inexplicably, this single snowflake therefore packs the full power of the entire storm – it's a blizzard of one. It says to you, almost silently, “It's time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening.”

The election of Donald Trump and the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, while dramatically different in almost every other way, are similar in one respect. Both illustrate what can happen when one person taps into a deep and even unconscious storm that remains mostly invisible to everyone else. They somehow sensed that it was time. The air was ready. The sky had an opening.

Make no mistake: I'm not passing overall judgment – not here, at least – on whether the Jesus blizzard and the Trump blizzard were good things or bad things. As I indicated earlier, I believe the evidence in Jesus' case is decidedly mixed, at best. And in Trump's case, most of the early evidence is against him, but the rest of story, of course, is yet to come. Rather, my point is that both Jesus and Trump sensed the deep-seated storm of longings and fears that swirled around them. Each became a blizzard of one.

Over the past few weeks, many of you have spoken to me about how powerless you feel in confronting the retrograde forces of enmity and bigotry that have been

unleashed in our world. You see the anger and sense the pain of people around you. Every day, you see people who have been left out and left behind, who have no livelihood and no prospect of finding one, who suffer physical pain or mental illness, who have no sense of purpose and no place of belonging. You sense the pain behind the anger, the hopelessness beneath the violence, and the despair beyond the devastation. And you feel like any effort you make to address these deeply-entrenched and vastly-daunting problems will come to nothing.

My gift to you this holiday season is a snowflake of the spirit. It's true that any effort you make to heal our needy and broken world will inevitably feel insubstantial — almost like you did nothing at all. But as a snowflake, you become part of something vast and powerful. There's another storm somewhere — a storm of love and justice, a storm of hope and healing. And your snowflake is a piece of it.

And when you stand up for what's good and what's right, when you reach out to comfort and to heal, when you press on with conviction and courage, your single snowflake packs the power of the entire storm. And who knows what might happen years hence as a result.

Especially now, it's time to be a snowflake. It's time to be a blizzard of one. Say to yourself, "It's time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening."