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POST

Why The Next American President Should Be An Artist

By Rachel Mason on November 18, 2016

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Senator Dick Durbin is known for being one of the few staunchly liberal voices left in the U.S. Congress. What's less known about Dick Durbin is that his daughter Jen is an amazing artist. She's also a good friend of mine, and a few days after the election of Donald Trump, I asked her if she ever thought about running for president. She replied, "I have zero interest. Zilch. You perhaps? I think you would be great!"

My question to her, thrown back at me, felt really uncomfortable, but then I thought more about it. There is a clear void of inspiring people on all levels of politics right now. An artist *should* run. Where is our American Václav Havel? (The beloved dissident avant garde writer who became president of the Czech Republic) Where is the candidate of the future who we on the left can feel uplifted by, and who can galvanize us in the way Trump (however artlessly) did on the right?

I am convinced that creativity will be the single most important asset needed in our political leadership after the Trump years end. We will need to rethink our approach to leadership within the existing political institutions. Many don't realize it, but the skills you need to become successful in the arts are the same skills you need in politics. There is no living artist whose name you know, who hasn't had to do a tremendous amount of negotiating with people, all the while cultivating personal discipline, perseverance, an ability to withstand social pressure and most importantly, remain creative.

People often think of artists as isolated, inarticulate savants lacking the skill set to tackle complex challenges. That stereotype is a pure myth. Many artists are incredible collaborators, businesspeople, and leaders. I personally know artists who have organized massive groups of people to do elaborate performances, artists who have become experts in niche areas of science, law, history and anthropology, artists who managed their own complex businesses endeavors through multiple agents, worked with galleries and curators to mount international museum exhibitions, toured elaborate multi-media performances all over the globe, and who are masterful at grant-writing and public speaking.

The artists I'm thinking about have also expressed their social conscience, not just in their work but through their words and deeds. Many have deep and profound feelings about social justice. The artists that I'm thinking of as potential candidates for president are the great voices of the American left.

I will acknowledge the obvious reality, if Jen or I are any indication, most artists would never want to become president. We are driven to use our skills and talents to make our own work. We set out to become artists, not run a country. And yet, that is why this group of extremely capable and inspiring people might be so perfectly suited to the task. They would not want to do it. As the great philosopher Plato said, "Power over persons is so dangerous a thing that only those can be trusted with it who do not want it."

In my little provocation, I will provide here my own highly personal and incomplete shortlist, because I want anyone who is reading this to start really thinking of people that they know, and who they are inspired by as well, and if any of the people I mention here, even for one second consider what I'm proposing, maybe not right now, maybe in five, ten, twenty or thirty years. If anyone I mention here decides to have the audacity to run for political office, this blog post will have served its function.

I know tomorrow there will be more names I wish I mentioned but this is a start.

Simone Leigh, Nina Katchadourian, Kiran Gandhi, Caitlin Cherry, Laurie Anderson, Micol Hebron, Susan Lacy, Kara Walker, Zachary Drucker, Fay Ray, Joan Jonas, Sandra Bernhard, AK Burns, A.L. Steiner, Francis Stark, Andrea Fraser, St. Vincent (Annie Clark), Holly Herndon, Missy Elliot, Ava Duvernay, Jill Soloway, Pia Wilson, Tina Fey, Mindy Kaling, Beyoncé, Laverne Cox, Margaret Cho, Bree Newsome, Emma Sulkowicz, Eleanor Antin, Rita Moreno. These artists collectively have carried created inspired performances, made large-scale works, toured the world, delivered powerful lectures, written plays, directed and produced film, and T.V. programs. Each is a potential great leader. The Future is now... and the Future is Female.

In addition to doing what is possible right now to challenge the coming changes that will be brought in by the new administration, I write this piece to fuel anger into something hopeful. A dream I'm happy to offer up to be ignored or ridiculed, what is there to lose by trying to think ahead?

I'll end with an excerpt from a quote Jen posted on Facebook yesterday from her Dad, "Peaceful protests are part of America. But organizing to win elections is the real force for change."
-United States Senator, Dick Durbin.

Dick Durbin's full quote is here.

There are forces which slow down every President: Congress (if the Republicans don't eliminate the filibuster they need 60 votes in the Senate on big issues and the highest level appointments. They have 52.); the Courts (the lower courts can still delay some things and the fate of the Supreme Court is still unresolved) and the bureaucracy (that part of the Executive which is a force to preserve the status quo even when there is an electoral change).

What to do?

Prepare for the next election in two years. Taking one house in Congress would stop the some of the worst any President could do.

Understand Trump rode in on a powerful force for change. He ran against both parties. We still don't know how extreme he will be; how fast he will move and whether the GOP will support him.

Peaceful protests are part of America. But organizing to win elections is the real force for change. (remember Move On) With social media we can organize more effectively than ever before.