

# OPTING OUT OF HALLOWEEN

*Donna M. Farina, Professor of Multicultural Education*

*There's nothing in the streets  
Looks any different to me  
And the slogans are replaced, by-the-bye  
And the parting on the left  
Are now parting on the right  
And the beards have all grown longer overnight  
—The Who, *Won't Get Fooled Again**

6 **R**ecently, a well-informed friend wryly commented that this election season in the U.S. is really no different from any other. It is a ritual, a cultural phenomenon like American Halloween—no more significant than that. As is often the case, the most perceptive comments on life in the U.S. come to me from people like my friend, who was not born here and whose experiences elsewhere give her that critical and perceptive eye. My friend's comment reinforced my own serious and considered decision to ignore this election season completely, as the only recourse left open to a concerned global citizen. I had to choose to do the most responsible thing I could to get ready to vote in November. So I am opting out of Halloween.

*The world* came into my consciousness for the first time with the closing of the Suez Canal at the beginning of the 1967 Six-Day War between faraway and unknown Egypt and Israel. As a ten-year-old who read the *Chicago Sun Times* daily, I thought most about the amount of sand that was filling the Suez Canal. A year later I began to think more about war when Soviet tanks rolled in to crush Prague spring. I had begun to have vague ideas about oppression and racism before Prague. In 1966, I was nine and apparently not reading the newspaper yet, but I remember watching on TV when protesters from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) marched on Cicero, Illinois (Film Group, Inc., 1966). Back then I didn't connect Cicero with *the world* because it was such a familiar place—where my aunt lived. Now I understand that these disparate world events, the first three of my memory, were a bellwether of my current concerns as an adult voter. While certainly a lifetime of events shapes any person's political consciousness,

today my main voting interests revolve around things that struck me as a child: the waste and destruction that results from war, the oppression of peoples, and the hope that people everywhere stubbornly try to maintain as they strive to make a difference and improve their own reality.

In the 1981 French version of Halloween, Francois Mitterrand was elected and I watched how, from the windows of Strasbourg apartments, people expressed hope by blasting the *Internationale* from stereo speakers: *Foule esclave, debout, debout / Le monde va changer de base* (Stand up, enslaved crowd/ the world will fundamentally change). Barack Obama's 2008 "Yes, We Can" Halloween shared the same hopeful note. However, these respective political campaigns told us almost nothing about the hard work of either presidency, about the world problems these leaders would encounter and how they would address them. In 1989, on my way home after nine months in the Soviet Union, I stopped off in Europe to visit



A scene from the film, *Cicero March* (Film Group, Inc., 1966).  
Courtesy: Chicago Film Archives: used with permission.



Photo by Kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5377898>

friends. Having been completely cut off from current events while in Leningrad, I was unaware of the protests taking place in Beijing and elsewhere in China. As we watched the TV, my French friends echoed the hope expressed by the Chinese students, a hope that my freshly gained Soviet experience told me would not be realized. By the time I was back on American soil, the tanks had rolled into Tiananmen Square and up to 800 civilian lives had been lost. Halloween does nothing for those of us who want to vote our understanding of Tiananmen Square.

Two years later American TV news broadcasted the attempt of Communist Party hardliners to oust Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev became a virtual prisoner of the KGB while a state of emergency was declared in Moscow; 250,000 pairs of handcuffs had been ordered a few days prior to aid in the anticipated arrests (Garcelon, 2005; Sebestyen, 2011). The conspirators, it turns out, did not have the support they thought they would—it is impossible to forget the image of Boris Yeltsin, then president of the Russian Federation, standing on a tank in front of the Russian Parliament (“White House”) as he addressed the thousands of

people gathered. But this optimistic beginning did not lead to the fulfillment of my own hope for the Russian people. Almost twenty-five years later, Russia has “no mass participation in political life and a news media that is far from free” (Sebestyen, 2011). And the post-Soviet world is a place where nationalism—the antonym of hope—thrives. Putin has successfully turned Russian public opinion as he positioned his nation against the U.S. and Europe.

Back in the West, lots of positioning is also going on. *The Economist* recently wrote “Anti-Immigrant Populism: The March of Europe’s Little Trumps” (2015), about movements in Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. In Hungary, on the surface there is a seemingly easy historical explanation for the anti-refugee popularity: the legacy of the Soviet bloc and Hungary’s alliance with the Nazis gives them a lack of experience with democratic values. But what about Sweden where the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats, with roots in the country’s neo-Nazi movement, is now the country’s largest party (Groll, 2015)? Demagogues have always existed, but why are they so popular right now? While the refugee crisis in Europe has played a role, is that the only reason?

A vote is a very weighty matter, and time is finite. Recently, at New Jersey City University’s 27th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Luncheon,<sup>1</sup> keynote speaker Ryan Haygood asked, “What time is it? And what are we supposed to do with this time?” He elaborated, “The stakes are too high to sit on the sidelines in the democratic process.” Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment* and *The Gambler* because he had a gambling addiction and owed money; most of us are Dostoevskys of time, behind on getting ready for our next class or providing students with feedback, having gambled our time away on something we considered either equally important—or possibly just more entertaining, like Halloween. Opting out of Halloween should never mean sitting on the sidelines if one is committed to achieving an informed vote in November. When time is freed up—from not reading news articles on U.S. politics, from not watching debates, from not listening to the morning recap of the most recent politician’s comment on the radio, and from not listening even to the State of the Union address or to the results from Iowa and New Hampshire—then can we prepare our vote with this time?

What time is it in Aleppo, and what are we supposed to do with Aleppo? This is a place where, as I write, 300,000 people are in danger of being cut off from food by Syrian government forces that have been newly empowered by Russian bombings. What time was it in the U.S. and in Europe before and during the unfolding of Aleppo? How did the U.S. and Europe gamble with their time? If there was no time available for Aleppo over the past few years will there now be time for the refugees?

*A vote is a very  
weighty matter,  
and time is finite.*



Copyright The Jersey Journal: used with permission.



Courtesy: Joseph Passantino, Bayonne Community News: used with permission.

Do you know what time it is in Donetsk, a city that a few years ago had a vibrant and busy metropolitan area of over two million people, once the fifth largest city in Ukraine? Where is Ukraine? (Educated Americans sometimes ask me.) Will there ever be any time for Ukraine? What time is it, for that matter, in Abkhazia?

What time is it in Bayonne, New Jersey? I recently attended the Zoning Board of Adjustment meeting in my city of residence, to support a Muslim group trying to receive permission to open a community center, despite intense local opposition.<sup>2</sup> The local opposition group proclaimed in a circulating flyer: “Remember 9/11” and “Don’t let the city council turn our beloved East Side into the next Dearborn, MI.” After the meeting I engaged with Gene Woods, a high school teacher who really knows what time it is. He has incorporated these local events as well as other aspects of diversity education into the social studies curriculum for his students, some of whom I also met at the Zoning Board meeting. I can’t wait until Mr. Woods’ students are old enough to vote, because they are learning *the world*.

During a world language model program evaluation for the New Jersey Department of Education, I met more young people who know what time it is. Students as young as nine years old explained to me why they needed to be fluent in a world language, so that they could “make friends” with people who don’t know English and so that they could visit other countries. These children will go to college one day and one day they will vote. They will be privileged over New Jersey City University students because of their opportunities to learn language. At NJCU, *our watch is running slow*—we do not yet have a foreign language requirement for graduation.

Those of us who are lucky enough to be in the profession of educating others can find time to teach *the world*, inside and outside of the classroom. Education may be the only real antidote to the civic irresponsibility and international ignorance that leads people to vote according to Halloween. The education we provide must give students the capacity, through a global perspective, to examine the silly things and the serious

things that happen in that part of the world called the U.S., as well as elsewhere. Since I am not a political science professor or a history professor, in the classroom I won’t be analyzing Putin’s latest law fining people who participate in demonstrations. Since I am not a business professor, I won’t be discussing the parameters of consumer attraction to the 100 ml, sleek black bottles of “Leaders Number One,” a new perfume inspired by Putin that went on sale in December (Walker, 2015).

As a professor of multicultural education who helps train ESL, bilingual, and world language teachers, I can talk about my recent sabbatical experiences to help my graduate students become global citizens. Today I had the time to mention in class the salaries and working conditions of teachers of language in the public schools of Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia; next week I’ll remember to mention what teachers in Tbilisi do to assist children with disabilities. Or, I might find a little time to explain why the Republic of Georgia has gotten serious about bilingual education on its eastern borders, where citizens of Azerbaijani or Armenian ethnicity do not speak the national language (i.e., Georgian).

Discussions such as these with my graduate students have everything *in the world* to do with the definition of and development of democratic values, and with the preparation for casting a vote. Dialoging with present or future teachers at New Jersey City University helps them maintain a more nuanced perspective on what happens in their own school, in Jersey City, Union City, or New Brunswick. Potentially, such discussions might help teachers make explicit the cultural values surrounding schooling and teaching in this country. I might also find the time, perhaps after class, to talk about how upheaval in a country like Syria will affect efforts to educate immigrant children right here in New Jersey. These interactions are important on another level, because my students must receive the message that information about their or their parents’ home countries is not just significant but absolutely necessary for those committed to intelligent, informed voting. If I don’t know anything about a student’s home country, I can listen or ask questions and learn something new, to improve my own global perspective.

The well prepared vote demands continuous engagement—inside and outside of the classroom—in the development of an imperfect, incomplete, and constantly changing international awareness. This is the only counterpoint I have to Halloween.

---

REFERENCES

- Anti-immigrant populism: The march of Europe's little Trumps. (2015, December 12–18). *The Economist*, 52-53.
- Film Group, Inc. (1966). *Cicero March*. (Available from Chicago Film Archives, [http://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/2873](http://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/2873))
- Garcelon, M. (2005). *Revolutionary passage: From Soviet to post-Soviet Russia, 1985-2000*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Groll, E. (2015, August 20). Shock poll rates Sweden's anti-immigrant right-wing party as country's largest. *ForeignPolicy.com*. Retrieved from [http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/20/shock-poll-rates-swedens-anti-immigrant-right-wing-party-as-countrys-largest/?wp\\_login\\_redirect=0](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/20/shock-poll-rates-swedens-anti-immigrant-right-wing-party-as-countrys-largest/?wp_login_redirect=0)
- Sebestyen, V. (2011, August 20). The K.G.B.'s bathhouse plot. *New York Times Sunday Review*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/opinion/sunday/the-soviet-coup-that-failed.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/opinion/sunday/the-soviet-coup-that-failed.html?_r=0)
- Walker, S. (2015, December 24). Put on some Putin: Russian president inspires new perfume. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/24/vladimir-putin-perfume-leaders-number-one>

---

NOTES

- 1 The Bayonne Zoning Board hearing will be continued on March 14.