



“Cognitive Dissonance #8” from the series “Wrestling with the Uneasy Present”
Digital Photcollages, Size Variable, 2016 by Beverly Naidus

for M/E/A/N/I/N/G edited by Mira Schor and Susan Bee

<http://ayearofpositivethinking.com/2016/12/07/meaning-the-final-issue-on-a-year-of-positive-thinking-2/>

Holding On

I’m out of breath, running down the sidewalk in a foul-smelling, factory town in Maine. My dad works at the plastics factory, as a research chemist, putting dead leaves, textiles and flowers in between sheets of acrylic to create new decorative plastics for home design – very 1950s. He’s grateful to have a job. He’s been blacklisted.

At that moment, I don’t know any of this. I only know that the air stinks, neighborhood kids are chasing me and I don’t know why. I am four years old, with dark, curly hair and olive skin. I look quite different from the locals. I am being pelted with grapes. They shout and then chant an unfamiliar expression at me, “DIRTY LITTLE KIKE.” It fills my ears like intractable glue that no anti-adhesive can remove.

Is that when I awoke? Perhaps. It was certainly one of the first seeds of awakening. I was being raised to assimilate, and the lesson that day was this: It’s not the difference that marks you. It’s the response of others to that difference.

I have learned that lesson repeatedly over the years. As the McCarthy Era drew to a close, my New Yorker parents, both children of immigrants, moved us closer to NYC, thinking we would all be more at home there; it did not help. Our new town had been the center of the New Jersey Nazi party during the 1930s. I don’t think my parents knew this. They were assimilating, and chose to live in a

non-Jewish part of town deliberately. Trouble was, a few of the neighbors were unhappy with this choice and made their displeasure known.

I felt the pressure to fit in. I sang solos in the Christmas choir at school, read the Bible secretly in bed, joined the Brownies and attempted to straighten my hair. Somehow all these attempts to be accepted fell short, and this failure came with a sticky residue of shame. That I couldn't pass was my fault. I grew wary. I began to identify with outsiders and oddballs. I began to write poetry and draw weird surreal images searching for a way out.

Thankfully there was an exit door with a neon sign that said "LIBERATION THIS WAY." I came of age in the late 60s. Although the complex counterculture was not necessarily a place to find easy comfort, it offered an alternative to suffocating and destructive conformity. I found safety and acceptance among feminists, queer friends, activists, artists, mystics and communities of color. All residues of dissonance between the dominant culture and my new havens of solidarity went into my creative work. Years later, as I expanded into teaching what I had learned as an artist, I began to offer similar refuge for my students to tell their stories of shame, otherness, trauma and alienation. That combined with some media literacy and anti-oppression training became a standard recipe for shifting or strengthening values. I saw and still see the trajectory of my work as something expansive; eventually subverting the dominant culture and replacing it with a world where difference will be celebrated and where equity and fairness will be the norm.

But I am not a Pollyanna who thought the bullies had gone away. The daily brutality of ongoing white supremacy, homophobia, patriarchy and corporate capitalism has been ever present and the manipulations of fear & economics have created an ongoing apocalypse for many.

Two nights ago, in response to the latest assault (our recent election), we attended a community meeting in a local church in our new hometown that was advertised with the appropriate name, "What Now?" Organized by the facilitators of the local Anarchist Discount Center (an online "buy nothing" group), they packed the room with eager, depressed, passionate, enraged, mostly younger, seemingly white folks. We made extensive lists of what concerns us the most; the panic almost bubbled over as each new item was added to the list. Small groups discussed strategies for resistance, solidarity, educating those who are feeling lost and vulnerable. It was a beginning.

Some people describe this bizarre post-election moment like a waking nightmare, like we are in suspended animation waiting for fascism to start. But those of us who have identified as activists for decades, once we have shaken off the disgust and frustration, have noticed an expanding cohort of awakening folks. It's essential that we share our tools for processing the daily trauma and insanity, and get grounded for the long haul. Our work will likely be much harder now, but with more imaginations and muscles joining the cause, who knows what will happen. We'll have to hold on to each other lovingly during this bumpy ride.

Beverly Naidus, Tacoma, WA 2016

Bio: Beverly Naidus has been subverting within academia, museums and public space for most of her adult life. She likes to stir things up via art, writing, face-to-face improvisations, online interventions and within contexts where difficult questions can be raised, vulnerable stories can be shared and connections can be made. For more about her work and pedagogy go to: <http://www.beverlynaidus.net>