

THE ELEVENTH-HOUR REAWAKENING

I saw the *BIDEN BEATS TRUMP* headline in the digital *N.Y. Times* on November 7 and felt my nearly chronic anxiety beginning to unlock. Actually, I think what I'll remember most about this long good-bye is CNN anchor Van Jones wiping the tears from his eyes as he registered the weight of Biden's victory. "Well, it's easier to be a parent this morning. It's easier to be a dad...it's easier...to tell your kid: *character matters*."

I found Jones's two-minute monologue almost unendurably moving. It evoked all those holiday stories about a reawakening of hope. And what's always struck me as interesting about *It's a Wonderful Life* — that classic film conventionally seen as a hymn to joy and friendship — is that it's largely a story of despair, culminating in a suicide attempt. And *A Christmas Carol*, often viewed through its life-affirming depiction of the recovery of Tiny Tim, is fundamentally a story chronicling the small, miserable life of a spiritually dead man: a life of solitary dinners and dark, unheated offices. Then, in both instances, comes the miraculous 11th-hour reawakening. (*The third-act turnaround*, as screenwriters are fond of saying.) And as improbable as these happy endings are, they are also deeply satisfying, and even deeply necessary. Despite the guardedness of our hearts, and our determination not to be emotionally manipulated, our eyes fill with tears. There is something in the heart that cries out for a reawakening in belief: a rediscovery that human beings are, in the end, fundamentally decent. Van Jones wipes his eyes behind his glasses because, though it's almost impossible to believe, at the 11th hour, the good guys finally won.

And so we want to celebrate. But this year the scientists tell us to keep holiday gatherings to a minimum. Or perhaps even celebrate alone. I'm reminded of a television broadcast I watched back in the fall of the High Holy Days streaming from Central Synagogue in New York City. There was an organist playing alone in a huge empty synagogue; he was wearing a mask. I remember thinking: "He's the Jewish Phantom of the Opera!" But there was also something beautiful in that barrenness — like a pilgrim holding a solitary service in the desert at night. And now the *N.Y. Times* warns us that if we get together with loved ones at holiday parties, we should not share the serving utensils; we should replace the bathroom towels with paper towels that can be individually discarded; we should avoid touching the wine bottles, and we should exchange all the air in the house every six hours by running the kitchen exhaust fan nonstop. And this is besides avoiding the room full of cousins cheering the after-meal football game, emitting viral particles all over the den, or the room full of bellicose relatives who still want to debate politics — if you call "screaming" a debate.

Maybe Lynn and I should spray everyone with hand-sanitizer each hour until they finally go home.... Or perhaps we should just sit with our dog Nellie in front of the fireplace, clink our glasses of wine, and be grateful in our small way that we've managed to survive this terrible year — and so has our country.